

Since 1957

THE CHARGER

October, 2001

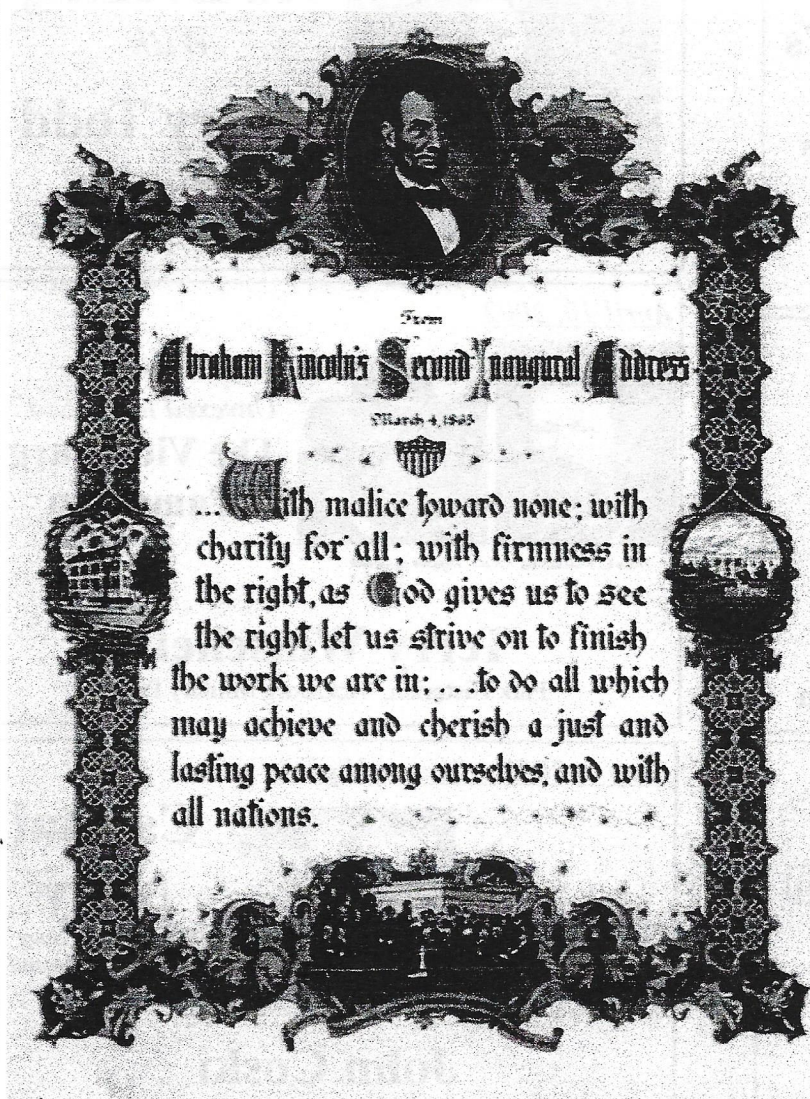
390 Meeting

Vol.23 #2

Tonight's Topic:

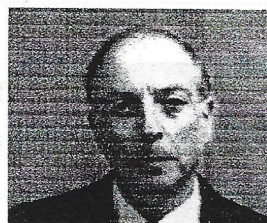
Abraham Lincoln:

Did he dream of a lily white America?



Tonight's speaker:

Gabor S. Boritt



Gabor Boritt is Robert C. Fluhrer Professor of Civil War studies and Director of the Civil War Institute of Gettysburg College.

Professor Boritt teaches courses on Abraham Lincoln, the Battle of Gettysburg, and the Civil War.

He has written or edited over a dozen books on Abraham Lincoln and the Civil War.

Gabor has three sons and owns a farm in Gettysburg. He enjoys travel, theater, classical music, sports and people.

**Date: Wednesday,
October 10, 2001**

**Place: The Cleveland
Playhouse Club
8501 Carnegie Ave.**

**Time: Drinks 6 PM
Dinner 7 PM**

**Reservations: Please Call
JAC Communications
(216) 861-5588**

Meal choice: chicken or sirloin

**CLEVELAND CIVIL WAR ROUNDTABLE
2001/2002 SCHEDULE**

October 10, 2001



Lincoln

The Great Emancipator: Did he dream of a lily white America?

Gabor Boritt

Robert C. Fluhrer Professor
of Civil War Studies
Gettysburg College

February 13, 2002



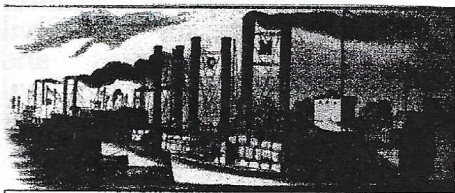
*"The Rock
of Chickamauga"*

George Thomas

Dan Zeiser

Past President Cleveland CWRT

November 14, 2001



The ships of Army Colonel Charles Ellet's Mississippi River ram fleet.

The Army's Navy

1861-1865

Roger Bohn

President of Chicago CWRT

March 13, 2002



An Evening With

Mary Todd Lincoln

December 12, 2001 "Period Dress"



Marines in the Civil War

Maj. David A. Dawson

April 10, 2002



John C. Pemberton



Ulysses S. Grant

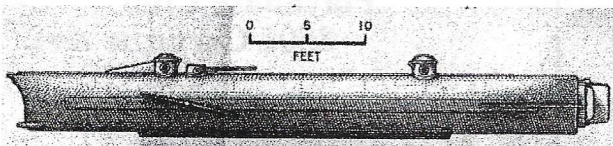
"Unvexed to the Sea" The Vicksburg Campaign

Terry Winschel

Park Historian, Vicksburg Military Park

January 9, 2002

World's first submarine



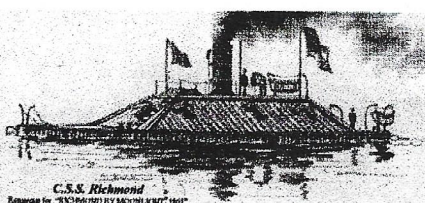
H.L. Hunley

South Carolina State Senator

Glenn McConnell

Chairman, Hunley Commission

May 8, 2002 "Guest Night"



Capital Navy

*Confederate Navy
guarding Richmond*

John Coski

Membership in the Cleveland Civil War Roundtable: Call (800) 800-8310 or visit our web site.

In AOL or Yahoo: internet >

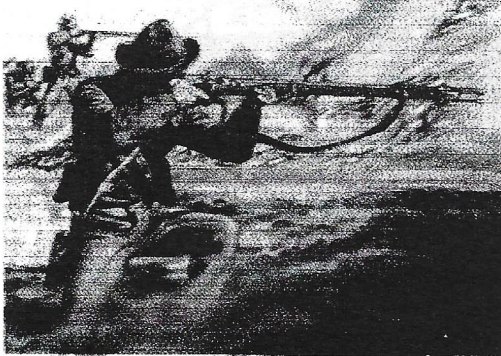
cleveland civil war roundtable

Search

THE SHARPSHOOTER

AND HIS WEAPON

By Sid Sidlo



Hitting a distant target with a bullet only looks easy. It takes a keen eye, steady hands, a great deal of training and practice, and a good firearm. Even with those qualifications and today's high-powered rifles, it is difficult to hit a man-sized target at three hundred yards without resting the rifle securely. And the black powder of the Civil War era was not high power. Now imagine firing a rifle at a distant enemy on a battlefield covered with powder smoke, with shell fragments flying around, and with the enemy riflemen and artillery in turn finding you a very desirable target. It took cool nerves under those conditions to estimate carefully the distance to the target, determine the high trajectory needed at the time, and allow for any wind. But that was the task of the Civil War sharpshooter, both Union and Confederate.

The concept of using expert marksmen in a role distinct from that of the ordinary infantryman was proposed in the summer of 1861 by the brilliant but erratic Hiram G. Berdan of New York, a mechanical engineer, prolific inventor - he originated a repeating rifle before the war, and a range finder and a torpedo boat for evading torpedo nets during and after the conflict - and the amateur champion marksman of the United States since 1846. He received permission from the government to recruit two regiments of qualified riflemen that would be armed with superior rifles.

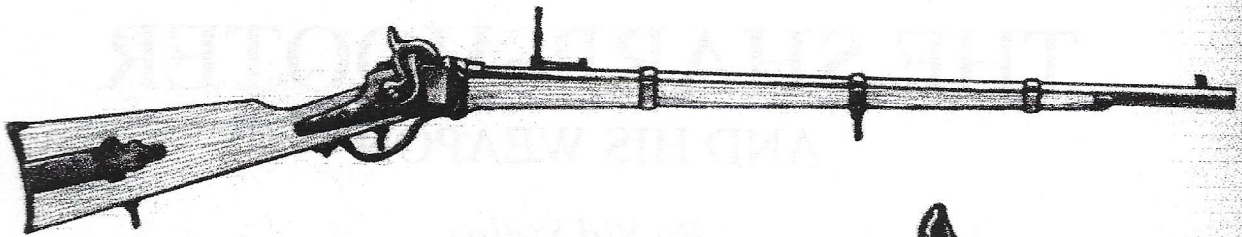
Only crack shots needed to apply. The chosen few had to put ten consecutive shots in a 10-inch circle at 200 yards, although with their choice of weapon and position. Try it sometime. But Berdan recruited extensively from Wisconsin to Vermont, and by November of 1861 the 1st and 2nd regiments of U.S. Sharpshooters had been mustered into service. They served throughout the war, and it was claimed that Berdan's regiments probably killed more rebel soldiers than any other regiments in the army.

By mid-1862, Secretary of War Edwin Stanton came to believe that regiments made up exclusively of sharpshooters were too unwieldy for tactical use, and the riflemen would best be organized as companies or squads, or even just as individuals, in regular regiments, to be deployed as the field commander chose. This became the practice for both Union and Confederate armies for the remainder of the war.

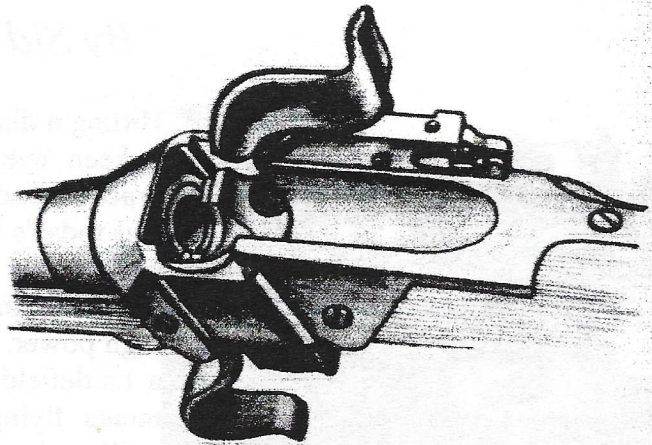
At first many of the snipers provided their own weapons, but this practice often posed problems of ammunition supply. Berdan requested issuance of Sharps rifles because of their fast breech-loading and outstanding accuracy at long range. Lt. Gen. Winfield Scott, fearing that this would lead to waste of ammunition, overruled Berdan, insisting on standard issue Springfield rifles. Berdan went to Lincoln, who after watching Berdan give a dazzling demonstration of speed and accuracy with the Sharps rifle, ordered it issued to the crack regiments.

Yet because many of the men were so comfortable with their personal rifles, they continued to use them throughout the war, even if they were muzzle-loaders and often weighted upwards of thirty pounds or more!

*Sid Sidlo is the editor of the **The Ramrod**, the newsletter of the North Carolina CWRT*



Sharps breech-loading rifle, .52 cal., length 47 inches. Also made as carbine, length 39 inches. Throwing trigger guard forward dropped breech-block. Linen cartridge was then inserted. When block rose, knife edge on block sheared off end of case so flame from cap could ignite charge. Strong, simple action, but leaked gas badly, sufficient in some to ignite linen handkerchief placed over breech. The cartridge was self-consuming.



Top view showing breechblock dropped

The Sharps rifle was invented in 1848 in Hartford, Connecticut, by gunmaker Christian Sharps. It was a single-shot percussion-cap breech-loader that could be fired eight to ten times a minute, three times the rate of the Springfield rifled musket in experienced hands. The Sharps weighed about twelve pounds, was 47" in length with an open-sighted 30" barrel, and fired cartridges with a .52 caliber conical ball. The rifle was accurate up to 600 yards, and with it a typical sharpshooter could put twenty bullets in a 24-inch pattern at 200 yards. Not the least advantage of the breech-loader was the ability to reload under battle conditions in which muzzle-reloading would be difficult, if not impossible.

To load his gun, the rifleman dropped the breech block by pushing forward on the trigger guard, then inserted a paper or linen cartridge. Pulling back the trigger guard raised and closed the breech block, on which a knife edge cut open the cartridge end to accept ignition from the cap. The hammer was then cocked manually. The combustible cartridge was consumed in the explosion, simplifying reloading. The linen cartridge, also invented by Sharps, held its shape better than paper and could stand rougher treatment. Metallic cartridges did not come along until after the war.

The Sharps rifle should not be confused with the breech-loading Sharps carbine, also .52 caliber, used by cavalry, where the ability to reload quickly while on horseback was often the deciding factor. The carbine weighed only eight pounds and was a handy 39" long. (Just as an aside, the term "**sharpshooter**" doesn't come from Sharps' name. It originated in Austria about the turn of the nineteenth century.)

The Confederate government bought Sharps rifles from northern manufacturers before Ft. Sumter, and made their own "Richmond Sharps" during the war (although these were of inferior quality), but their favorite sniper weapon was the Whitworth .45 caliber rifle, an English design from the mid-1850s. Forty-nine inches in overall length, it fired a six-sided grooved bullet through a 33-inch barrel having a hexagonal bore with a rapid twist that gave phenomenal steadiness to the bullet's flight.

The Whitworth was the most accurate long-range rifle of the Civil War. With an open sight and firing from a fixed rest or the prone position, the shooter could place his shots in a twelve-inch diameter circle at 500 yards. With the 14 1/2" telescopic sight mounted on the left of the stock, the rifle had a killing range of 1500-1800 yards, or about a mile. We all know the story of Union general John Sedgwick, killed at Spotsylvania when shot in the head by a bullet fired from a Whitworth rifle 800 yards distant.

The Whitworth too was fired with a percussion cap. Its disadvantage was that it was a muzzle-loader, hence slow to load, and like all muzzle-loaders, needed cleaning every few rounds. But its outstanding accuracy made it worth the trouble. It was usually issued only to top marksmen in Confederate army corps.

The mission of the sharpshooter was to kill from a distance. Feared by both sides, he was as much a psycho-logical as a tactical weapon of the Civil War. While most valuable in a protracted siege operation, he was useful in combat large and small. With a superior weapon fired from a rest such as a tree limb, skilled shots could hit small targets at half a mile or more. But these riflemen were often rural lads who had grown up with rifles in their hands, and many were probably good enough to be nearly as proficient Whitworth with a Springfield rifle. Accuracy under these conditions was important, but the breech-loader rate of fire was even more advantageous.

The position of sharpshooter in any regiment was usually an enviable one. In many units. North and South, they were often excused from routine camp and guard duty and spent hours daily in the more satisfying exercises of marksmanship and estimating distance. Since even in the heat of battle they could fire individually and more carefully than the ordinary soldier with a Springfield rifle, they were equipped with hand-held mechanical range finders that estimated distance, and thus trajectory, based upon the target's apparent height.

On the other hand, while sharpshooters did not have to endure the mass fire on the regimental line, they were a favorite target of enemy artillery and sharpshooters just as enemy officers and artillery batteries were their favorite targets. Sharpshooters were often in demand as skirmishers. Overall, they had a rate of casualties typical of ordinary soldiers in line of battle.

Sid Sidlo

Why couldn't a civil war soldier hit anything?

The average civil war soldier could not hit the proverbial bull in the behind with a bass fiddle. Training would have helped, but training in marksmanship was something woefully lacking in most commands during the Civil War. Little time or ammunition was allocated to actual range practice—and many recruits went into battle without having fired a single practice round. Little wonder that pounds of lead were expended for each hit made, that many a man fired his piece, unaimed, into the blue, or that front-rank men, their ears ringing or their beards singed, were known to turn about and pummel their overzealous rear-rank comrades.

What made hitting extremely difficult was the high trajectory of the huge chunks of lead thrown by the old rifled muskets. Ranges had to be correctly estimated and sights carefully adjusted for anything but the very closest ranges. A bullet fired by a kneeling man at the belt buckle of a man running toward him at an estimated range of 300 yards would just pass over the head of a man 250 yards away. Thus, if the shooter had overestimated the range by as little as 50 yards he would have missed.

FLORENCE PRISON STOCKADE

By Dale Thomas

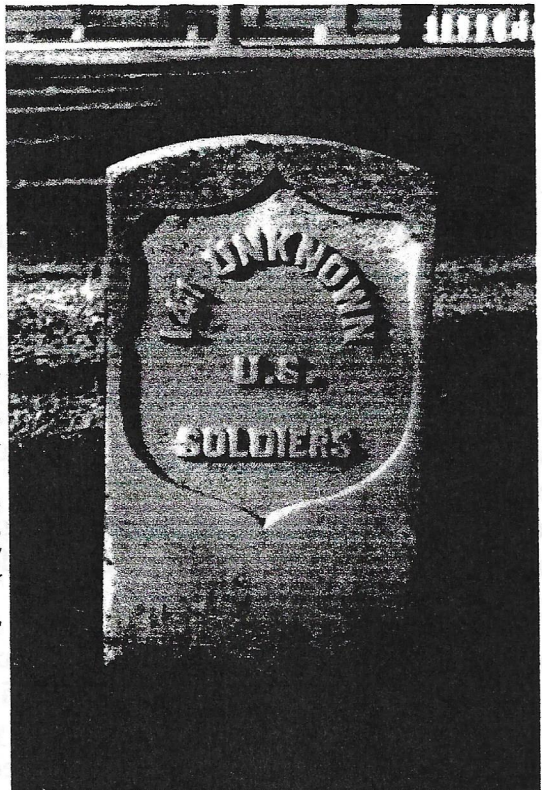
"Hell hath enlarged herself, and opened her mouth without measure."

Isaiah

Traveling north on Interstate 95 from Florida, early last spring, we stopped for the night at a motel in Florence, South Carolina. Since it was not yet suppertime, I decided to visit Florence National Cemetery and perhaps locate the site of the infamous Civil War prison. I drove through a rather dismal downtown area, looking for signs to point the way, but there were none. Finally, I stopped for gasoline and asked the cashier for directions. He said to turn at the next intersection onto Cemetery Road and go east for a few miles. But he knew [^]nothing of no Confederate prison." Driving east on the narrow road, I hoped the cemetery had not closed for the day. Then I saw a long brick wall and the open iron gates.

Next to the closed visitor's center, a sign warned would be vandals that it was a federal crime to desecrate a national cemetery. No one else was in the graveyard except me, and I walked toward a solitary marker that stood shaded beneath a tree draped with Spanish moss. "Friends of the Florence Stockade" had erected the plaque only a few years earlier on Memorial Day of 1998. In a brief paragraph, the tragic story was summarized:

"ON EACH SIDE OF THIS MARKER LIE THE REMAINS OF APPROXIMATELY 2300 UNION SOLDIERS WHO DIED AS PRISONERS IN THE FLORENCE PRISON STOCKADE BETWEEN SEPTEMBER 1864 AND FEBRUARY 1865. THE STOCKADE WAS LOCATED ACROSS CEMETERY STREET ON STOCKADE ROAD. BURIALS ARE IN TRENCHES INDICATED BY STONE MARKERS AT THE END OF EACH ROW SHOWING THE NUMBER OF INDIVIDUALS PLACED THERE."



Dale Thomas is a retired history teacher and Historian of the Cleveland CWRT

Almost as old as the graveyard, a large tree had grown from the earth covering one of the trenches. I thought this great oak was a more fitting tribute to the dead, who had first nurtured its roots, than any plaque, tombstone or monument. Pacing a line between two of the limestone markers, I estimated a distance of roughly fifty yards. Since there were sixteen trench burials, the total length was equal to eight football fields.

Contemporary accounts claimed total deaths had been as high as 6000 federal prisoners. In an official study done in 1871, the U.S. Army estimated the number dead to be at least 2,800. Only the names of 296 of this total are known today. Florena Budwin is the only woman on the list. Enlisting as a male to be with her officer husband, she was captured after his death and sent to the prison. Her masquerade was not discovered until becoming ill, and she was buried separate from the trenches.

Florence stockade was built to hold prisoners from Andersonville, which as being threatened by Sherman's army in Georgia. After enduring nine, horrendous months in Andersonville, John McElroy, a trooper from the 16th Illinois Cavalry, was transferred to Florence in late November. "We found this a small copy of Andersonville... No shelter, nor material for constructing any, was furnished..." The first prisoners to arrive put up small cabins built with wood left over from the stockade walls. Most of the prisoners dug cave like burrows that were more like graves than a place for the living. Wood was scarce even though a nearby pine forest could have provided ample wood for building and heating cabins.

"The ration of wood grew smaller as the weather grew colder until at last they settled down to a piece about the size of a kitchen rolling pin per day for each man. This had to serve for... cooking, as well as warming." Some of the starving men "mixed the (corn) meal with water and swallowed it raw. Frequently their stomachs, irritated by the long fast, rejected food; a burning fever was consuming them and seething their brains with delirium." Dysentery and scurvy killed as many as forty each day. "One of the commonest sights was to see men whose hands and feet were simply rotting off... The naked frames of starving men were poorly calculated to withstand this frosty rigor, and thousands had their extremities so badly frozen as to destroy the life in those parts and induce a rotting of the tissues by a dry gangrene."

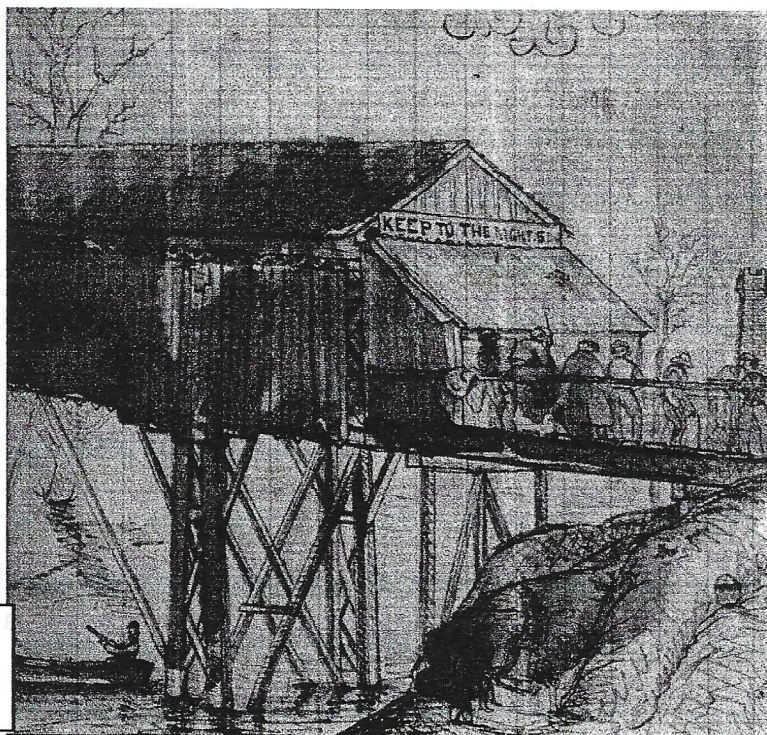
With federal troops approaching in the middle of February, "all of us who were able to walk were made to fall in and march over to the railroad, where we were loaded into box cars. The sick -- except those who were manifestly dying -- were loaded into wagons and hauled over. The dying were left to their fate without any companions or nurses." McElroy feared the Rebels "would be tempted in the rage of their final defeat to commit some unparalleled atrocity upon us." Instead they were taken in the direction of Wilmington on the coast of North Carolina. Eventually, Federal troops closed in on the train and the men were at long last freed. "The sun had already risen, bright and warm, consonant with the happiness of the new life now opening up for us." Not all of McElroy's comrades lived to see this glorious day — the sun "fell upon stony, staring eyes, from out of which the light of life had faded, as the light of hope had done long ago."

The death rate in the Florence stockade was 15.5% of the prison population. Andersonville rate was 28.7% and Salisbury's about 24%, but those who had been in these two prisons saw Florence as the worst by far. "We thought we had sounded the debts of misery at Andersonville but Florence showed us a much lower depth," McElroy recalled. "I cannot understand how anybody could live through a month of Florence. That many did live is only an astonishing illustration of the tenacity of life in some individuals."

I looked at my watch and realized the cemetery should have closed a half hour ago, but as before, no one was at the office. I drove through the open gate and turned east in search of Stockade Road. I found the road and drove south to the end without seeing any markers. Where the stockade walls once stood was a thicket of trees and bushes. On the other side of the road, I passed an animal shelter with well-fed cats sunning themselves behind a chain link fence. Back again on Cemetery Road, I came to a grocery store and turned into the parking lot. Then I saw across the road a tall, rectangular stone, much larger and finer than any of the stones marking the trench burials. After walking through briars to get a closer look, I read the inscription on the polished granite:

"THIS BOULDER WAS PLACED HERE BY THE UNITED DAUGHTERS OF THE CONFEDERACY OF FLORENCE, S.C. JANUARY 27, 1947 TO RECORD THE FACT THAT DIRECTLY SOUTH OF THIS SPOT WAS SITUATED A STOCKADE WHERE 6500 FEDERAL PRISONERS WERE CONFINED 1864 - 1865 AND TO PAY TRIBUTE TO THE CONFEDERATE SOLDIERS AND THE CITIZENS OF THE COMMUNITY WHO IN THE LINE OF DUTY GUARDED THESE PRISONERS."

Dale Thomas



A Confederate prison made from a covered bridge spanning the Pearl River at Jackson, Mississippi. 400 Union captives endured deplorable conditions in the winter of 1862-63.

MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT

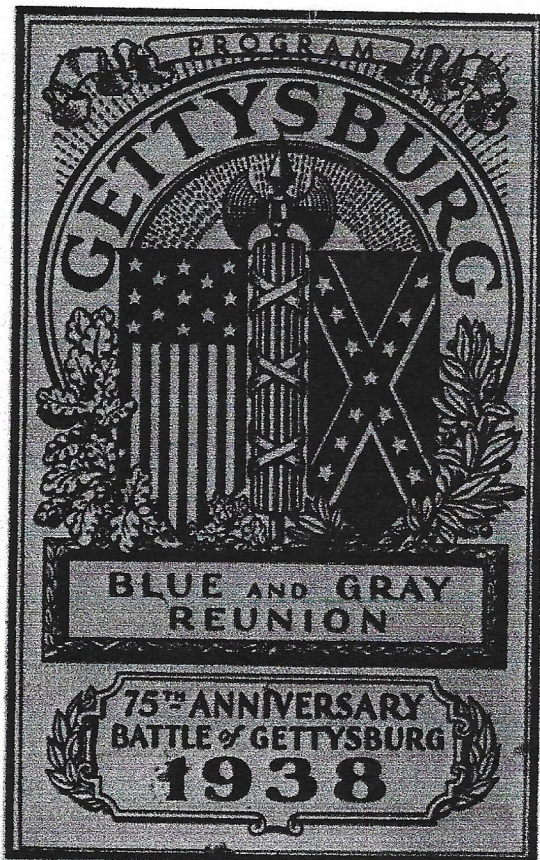
It was very gratifying to see so many members at the first yearly meeting last month considering all the turmoil that was engulfing our country. I will reschedule Senator McConnell, our original speaker, for either January or February next year. He certainly wanted to come to Cleveland and give his presentation to us. In just a few months we'll all learn the secrets of the HUNLEY.

As I write this, the members of this years fieldtrip are about to leave for Charleston, SC, the seat of secession. Needless to say, we are nervous but we will not let fear stand in our way. History waits for no man, and certainly not our CWRT group. Details on the trip will appear in the next newsletter. The book raffle was a large success with over \$200 raised for battlefield preservation. I hope we can keep it up. If anyone has any civil war books they have read and wish to donate to the raffle, please bring them to any meeting.

I would like to personally thank William Vodrey for stepping in with only 24 hours notice and delivering a wonderful presentation last month.

Last but not least, if you wish to contribute an article, large or small, to the newsletter, please contact Dick Crews. He is always looking for interesting material. Sharing ideas and information on our civil war is what we are all about.

Bill McGrath



"PICKETT'S CHARGE: THE BATTLE OF GETTYSBURG"

BY GERRY ALTOFF
HISTORIAN, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 23, 2001
7:00 PM

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Program from the 75th anniversary of the Battle of Gettysburg.



Abraham Lincoln, *"Did he dream of a lily white America"*

October 10, 2001