

## HISTORY OF THE CIVIL WAR ROUNDTABLE OF NEW HAMPSHIRE

The Civil War Roundtable of New Hampshire was founded in May 1991 by Duane Shaffer and the late Malcolm Wetherbee. As Duane recalls:

"When I assumed the directorship of the Harvey-Mitchell Memorial Library in Epping in the fall of 1985 I started looking at what the library had on New Hampshire history. It seemed to me that people in NH were mostly interested in the Revolutionary War and not much outside of the regimental histories had been done. I gave my first presentation on Epping's role in the Civil War in October 1986.

After that I started receiving invitations from other libraries and historical societies in Rockingham County. By 1989 I was doing one presentation somewhere in NH every week. Ken Burns came along in 1989-90 with his series and people really started to take notice of the war. The Exeter Newsletter had already done a society article on me because I was the director in both Epping and Newington, and they referred to me as the "Circuit-riding librarian." Somewhere in that piece I mentioned that I did talks on the Civil War. Soon after that they did another article where they questioned me closely about my impressions of the Ken Burns series and the movies *Glory* and *Gettysburg*. The wave of interest in the war was really at its peak then. One afternoon in March or April of 1991 I was at the front desk and this distinguished looking gentleman comes in and starts talking to me about the war. He had seen the Exeter Newsletter articles and was excited about starting a roundtable. He stated that he had been studying the fact that Boston had a roundtable discussion group, and wouldn't it be great if New Hampshire could have one too. I was, at first, very skeptical that such a group could succeed in New Hampshire. Boston was one thing because it had such a well-publicized Civil War history. He insisted that we try so we set a date in May 1991 and so the roundtable was born. The first slate of officers was: Myself as President, Malcolm as Vice-President, Bruce Smith as Treasurer and Rhonda Smith as Secretary."

By the late 1990's membership hit a peak at over 100. This was primarily due to riding the wave of movies like *Glory* and *Gettysburg* and of course a fellow New Hampshire man, Ken Burns and his PBS documentary.

Meetings continued at the Harvey Mitchell Library in Epping, even after Duane relocated to Florida about 2005. But at the start of 2006, we moved next door to the Epping Town Hall.

Some key players aside from Duane and Malcom in the group include:

- Barry Burnham was a charismatic president in the late 1990s with the energy and style of B.T. Barnum meets gameshow host.
- Bill Hallett continues to run the web site (since 2002), schedule speakers, and was past newsletter editor and for 10 years president.
- Dan Bennis, who likely came to the second meeting and stuck around. Dan has been on the board all that time and has been key to coordinating with the town for the use of the town hall.
- Harold Williams, who continues to keep track of tax issues and our legal status as a 501c non-profit.
- Mike Schroder, current president and longtime board member.
- Elly Becote was an early member and often speaker, who always relayed photos and talks on various trips to Civil War sites.

Some of our popular guest speakers have included: Wayne Motts, Ed Bearss, Will Greene, Craig L. Symonds, Catherine Wright, Christopher Gwinn, and Patrick Falci, just to name a few. But we also tap into regional speakers such as Prof. Michael Pearson, Prof. Kate Clifford Larson, historian Chuck Veit, historian Dick Adams, and many within our own group.

We have taken a few fieldtrips to such places as Fort Warren in Boston Harbor; Joshua L. Chamberlain Museum and gravesite in Brunswick, Maine; Gettysburg's (Lost) Neill Avenue tour with Dean Schultz; Gettysburg tour of Pickett's Charge with LBG Wayne Motts; Civil War grave tour at South Cemetery with Dick Adams in Portsmouth, NH and we've done some cemetery clean-up of the John B. Batchelder family graves in Nottingham, NH. Some members even go to Remembrance Day in Gettysburg in November.

We worked with Strawberry Banke Museum in Portsmouth, with suggestions and input on the Sesquicentennial in 2011, which led to involvement with a sword owned by, and ceremony for, Fitz John Porter, a son of Portsmouth.

In 2016 as we celebrated our 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary, we featured a reunion of many long past members including Malcom Wetherbee (before his passing) and Duane Shaffer from Florida. The evening featured New Hampshire's own Civil War era band, The Hardtacks, playing music of the times as we had standing room only.

We continue as a group but membership is far from the numbers we had in the 1990s. New faces appeared and many other faces fade into our past. It gets tougher to charge forward, but we do.

[www.cwrt-nh.org](http://www.cwrt-nh.org)

[cwrtnh@gmail.com](mailto:cwrtnh@gmail.com)