

HISTORY OF THE BRUNSWICK CWRT

MAY 2010 -- PRESENT 2019

Two Civil War buffs met at a party in January 2009. The conversation turned to THE topic. They talked about the battlefield tours they had taken. They discussed the books they enjoyed. They reminisced about the Round Tables they had joined. Tom O'Donnell and Wally Rueckel both enjoyed the Wilmington CWRT very much, but they did not like the drive. So, Tom suggested they start their own Civil War Round Table for Brunswick County. With business leadership experience, both men had the skills needed to organize the venture. They formed a planning committee with Bob Benedict, Eugene Lasinski, Norm Praet and Chuck Roedema. Their combined time with other Round Tables led them in the right direction.

They sought the advice of professionals in the field of history. Larry Maisal, of the Southport Historical Society; Max Williams, retired history professor from Western Carolina University; Mary Strickland, Director of the NC Maritime museum, Southport; Jim McKee, Chief Historical Interpreter (currently Director) at Brunswick Town/Ft. Anderson; and Chris Fonvielle, professor of history at UNCW, author, the leading expert on the war on the Cape Fear River, all provided excellent advice. (Max would stay on as a Director of BCWRT, and Jim and Chris would become speakers and Advisors in the new organization.)

The Planning Committee worked for a year in organizing, recruiting and forming the Brunswick Civil War Round Table. The initial Board of directors: Tom O'Donnell, Wally Rueckel, Jim McKee, Norm Praet, Bob Benedict, Max Williams, Chuck Roedema and Charen Fink, also originally served as officers or directors. Tom O'Donnell was the first president, but soon health concerns led him to step down. Then, Wally Rueckel became president and held that position until 2015. Mike Powell succeeded Wally and remains current president. Charen Fink and Jim Johnson occupy current VP slots, Jennifer Chapman is Secretary and Gary Krupp is the current Treasurer. Chuck Roedema, Tish Gordon, Kathy O'Donnell and Gifford Stack serve as Directors.

We set our meeting for the first Tuesday of each month, 7 PM, September to June. With everything in place, our first meeting gathered on May, 2010, at Trinity United Methodist Church, Southport. Eighty-five folks attended, nearly half of them women. The original vision sought to establish a forum open to any and all individuals, regardless of Civil War knowledge. The vision included women from the start. The large number of women that attended the first meeting validated the vision and changed the way we did things. Our topics and speakers would not be dominated by the military history of the war, but also include topics sometimes thought far afield. Our mission statement remains that our goal is to educate and communicate the unbiased history of the war as well as preserve its history.

Time has been good to us. By December of 2014, our membership had grown such that we needed more space. We moved to Hatch Auditorium on the grounds of the North Carolina Baptist Assembly at Fort Caswell on Oak Island. An excellent facility that holds 1000 with an elevated stage, balcony and state of the art A/V equipment, Fort Caswell carries its own Civil War history as a part of the string of forts that defended the port of Wilmington. We greatly appreciate our host, the North Carolina Baptist Assembly, for such a fine home for our club at Fort Caswell. In a mutually beneficial relationship, 2018-

2019, saw us provide interpretive plaques on the site of Fort Caswell at the mouth of the Cape Fear. Even though it is not their mission, the Assembly allowed us to bring interpretation to their Civil War site with durable plaques telling the tale.

Our programs draw a broad membership. In 2014, Charen Fink, Director, formed the Civil War Ladies Forum for women only. They generally meet quarterly at Trinity Methodist Church (our first venue) and average over 100 attendees for a program designed just for ladies. The growth of the BCWRT continues today with our membership hovering at 1200 and attendance averaging over 400 per meeting. Despite our efforts, however, we have still been unable to attract youth with to our group, but we continue to work on it. Our membership base hails from Wilmington, North Carolina, to Myrtle Beach, South Carolina.

Our large membership allows us to bring in the best speakers as well as support our local historians. The topics share the diversity of our speakers. For the first three years Max Williams, Program Chairman, set the tone for our topics. Since then, current President and Program Chairman Mike Powell, has continued the blueprint Max created: Good presenters speaking with authority on their subject -- a winning combination.

Our evenings serve as social events as much as learning experiences. We provide coffee and cookies, period music, and a slide show featuring local events of interest to our membership. We periodically add live musicians playing/singing Civil War songs for 45 minutes before the speaker begins.

We have several revenue sources while retaining modest membership dues. Our annual fee, originally \$25.00 per family, remains unchanged. Our generous membership donates many items that we convert to cash as in our used book sales table with hundreds of volumes, Civil War models and art for raffles. A 50/50 raffle is always well-supported and provides funds that support our work. All these revenue sources allow us to provide quality programs. As with any successful club, we would not exist without active volunteers. Our volunteers are exceptional. We always find a job for a member willing to work.

As membership grew recording nightly attendance became cumbersome. Member Len Trzinski, developed a program to check people in quickly while maintaining a record of who attended. Our six computer stations record the information in the Cloud and allow us to produce valuable reports on who attends each meeting. As our needs grow and we understand the program's capabilities better, we continue to find ways to get more information.

In our effort to serve the membership beyond the monthly meeting, we conduct day trips (organized by John Walsh) to North Carolina Civil War sites. With Chris Fonvielle, Wade Sokolosky and Jim McKee as Advisors and tour guides, we can provide experts for any site we choose. If truly comprehending the events of a site is our goal, then it is best achieved with a guide.

We also believe a Roundtable should support preservation, so since our inception we have donated over \$50,000 for that purpose. We work locally on projects who cannot get support elsewhere. We commit to causes where we can have an immediate and substantial impact. We have liaised with local organizations such as Fort Fisher, Brunswick/Fort Anderson, The NC Maritime Museum in Southport, to vet our projects and get the most bang for our members' bucks.

Our public relations extend far beyond mundane club announcements in a line of the local paper. We *do* make full use of local newspapers besides Internet web pages, Facebook, monthly newsletters, flyers

to members, etc. We work with other organizations to mutually promote events. We instituted an Advisor program that allows us to seek advice on speakers, events, preservation projects and other programs from historians, historical organizations and the business community. We try to be good citizens of our community. When disaster strikes, we are gratified that BCWRT is one of the first organizations contacted to help out. We pride ourselves on our response to the Hurricane Florence disaster in our community as much as for any history activities we have pursued. We also joined with the community to make sure that our neighbors down the road at the USCG Station had all they needed during the recent government shutdown.

As part of our “Outreach Program”, three years ago Wally Rueckel, Mike Powell and Ted Kuensling (of the Raleigh Civil War Round Table) reached out to the other Civil War Round Tables in NC to set up a framework to share best practices. We have already held two annual meetings. Though we want to share strengths we also wish to avoid pitfalls. One of the first fruits of sharing created a speaker database that each Round Table has access to and simplifies the sometimes-difficult job of contacting presenters. In the last two years Wally Rueckel has worked with several Round Tables across the country to conduct CWRT National Congress meetings to accomplish the same goals.

We believe our Round Table serves as a model for the 21st Century CWRT. Though we are the largest Civil War Round Table in the country, we have a very simple motto: “No matter if there are 40 or 400 in attendance, we try to put on the best event we can, each and every time.”

Mike Powell

President, Brunswick Civil War Round Table