KCWRT is a non-partisan, non-profit, educational forum for promotion of knowledge, commemoration, and preservation of our American Civil War heritage. Meetings are always open and visitors are always welcome.

The Scout's Report

Knoxville Civil War Roundtable
P. O. Box 52232
Knoxville, TN 37950-2232
Website: kcwrt.org

VOLUME XIV | OCTOBER 2026 | NO. 4

KCWRT MEETING

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 13TH
****Buffet at 6:30 PM****
****Speaker at 7:30 PM****
Dinner & Presentation
$22.00 Members
$25.00 Non-members
Presentation Only
$8.00 Members
$10.00 Non-members

DINNER RESERVATIONS MUST BE MADE OR CANCELED BY 11 AM, FRIDAY, OCT. 9TH
CALL (865) 671-9001 AND LEAVE A MESSAGE

MENU
Meatloaf
Honey Pecan Chicken
Whipped Potatoes
Greens Beans
Garden Salad
Beverages
Assorted desserts

LOCATION
Bearden Banquet Hall
5806 Kingston Pike

THIS ISSUE

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Destruction of the Steamboat Sultana

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times…"



In the days immediately following Lee's surrender at Appomattox, there was jubilation across the north. There were still Confederate armies in the field to be sure, but it was clear that the end of the war was near. Then came the shocking news of the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, and the eyes of the nation north and south turned to the manhunt for John Wilkes Booth and his fellow conspirators.

Meanwhile in the west, paroled federal soldiers, weakened by the ravages of the Cahaba and Andersonville Prison Camps, were gathered at Camp Fisk awaiting transportation north. On April 24th, 1865, these boys from Indiana, Michigan, Ohio, Kentucky, and East Tennessee, heads full of thoughts of home, joyfully boarded the sidewheel Mississippi steamboat

Sultana in Vicksburg, Mississippi. Bound for repatriation and a formal mustering out, they were 2,000 strong and took up every square foot of the boat.

At 2 a.m. on April 27, 1865, when the steamboat was seven miles above Memphis, her boilers exploded. Almost 1,200 people perished in the cold, flood waters of the Mississippi that night making it the worst maritime disaster in American history. Greed, corruption, and ignorance all led to the overloading of a boat that was legally registered to carry only 376 passengers. Come join us as historian and author Gene Eric Salecker covers a disaster too long overshadowed by Booth's death the day before and dispels many of the myths long connected to the Sultana.

WELCOME BACK TO KNOXVILLE, GENE SALECKER!



Gene Eric Salecker is a military historian whose seven published books include Disaster on the Mississippi: The Sultana Explosion, April 27, 1865 (1996); Destruction of the Steamboat Sultana: The Worst Maritime Disaster in American History (2022) and The San Francisco V-J Day Peace Riots: Celebration Turned Deady, August 13-15, 1945 (2026). Arguably the world's leading authority on the Sultana disaster, Gene owned the largest collection of Sultana artifacts and memorabilia in the world which he donated to the Sultana Disaster Museum in Marion, Arkansas. A graduate of Northeastern Illinois University, he is a retired police officer and retired middle school teacher currently acting as the historical consultant for the Sultana Disaster Museum. He lives in River Grove, Illinois with his wife, a cat, and dozens of tropical fish.

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

By Timothy D. Vane

It's true that some shark species will drown if they can't continuously push water over their gills for respiration. Great White and Mako sharks come to mind. Kind of a grim way to start my message for this month, no? My point is simply that, for organizations, like sharks, inactivity can lead to catastrophic consequences. Roundtables, in my opinion, have to keep moving forward in order to sustain themselves over time. Come to think of it, all civic groups must do this or they cease to be relevant, notable or they fall out of compliance with their mission statement. So, how do we keep moving forward? By creating metrics and trying to reach them. Metrics, in this sense, are accomplishments that mark progress towards achieving goals. They're tangible, quantifiable and understandable. And either we make them or we don't. They also tie in tightly with our organizational framework as we develop our strategies, goals and objectives. I say all of this in the spirit of Vision 2028. Establishing metrics in 2027 is in keeping with this year of experiments to determine if they're helpful and then carried forward in 2028. The board will be working on them soon and we'll talk about them more in December.

When I became president, I also shared with all of you my own personal goals and metrics. I had four goals for my presidency: Increase membership by 10% from the start of FY 2026 (18 new members); field a modern, useful website; begin interpretation of the Armstrong Hill battlefield and create strategic partnerships with foundations, societies, civic groups, etc. in Knoxville and East Tennessee. By my accounting anyway, I'm halfway there. We added over 30 members last year (we'll add more this year) and through the talent and skills of Craig Brown we have an outstanding website that will be continually improved over time. Two down, two to go. Armstrong Hill and strategic relationships are what I'll be focused on personally over the rest of my time in office. However, time is inelastic and no one is making more of it, so something has to give. Which means I won't be doing any more presentations for which the Roundtable receives a stipend. The presentation program has been wildly successful as four of our members (Gerald Augustus, Dennis Urban, Tom Wright and me) have brought in over $12,000 since FY 21. That also means that paying membership dues for this year is more important than ever since this funding source stopped in September. Fortunately, one of our new members, Brad Fairchild, will pick up providing presentations but he won't be able to start until sometime in the new year.

Finally, my thanks to Tom Wright, our vice president, for taking over for me as the host for our September membership meeting. I had a family obligation that prevented me from attending and Tom came through in his usual competent manner. I also want to thank our friend, Matt McClanahan, from the Cumberland Mountain CWRT for being our guest speaker in September. His topic on the impact agriculture had on the decision-making of Civil War leaders was one that often gets short shrift but had an outsized impact on the conduct of campaigns.



Matt McClanahan

TRAVELOGUE #8

The Battle of Armstrong Hill

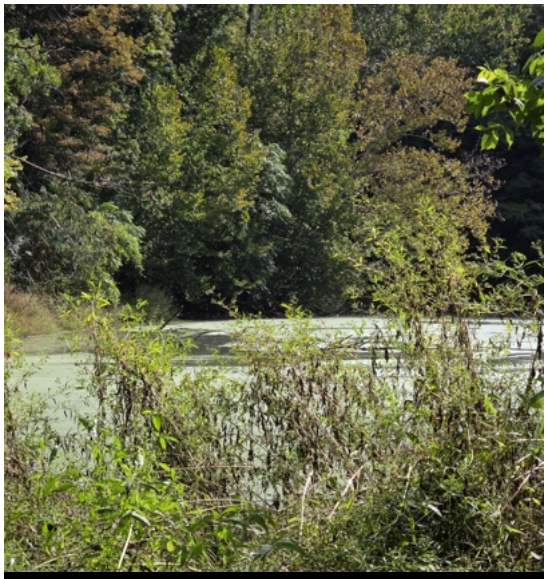
Tim Vane and Jim Doncaster



The 103rd Ohio Probably Moved Up This Ridge to the Top of Armstrong Hill

If the name Armstrong Hill sounds familiar, it should. It is the battlefield in Knoxville that our Roundtable is working with the city to protect, preserve and interpret for future generations. But how many members know where it is, let alone what happened there and why? First, the easy part. The site is located just across the street from High Ground Park (1000 Cherokee Trail in Knoxville), aka Fort Higley. The entrance to the parking lot is directly across from a big, blue water tower adjacent to the park. Be careful though, the parking lot isn't paved, and it's steep and often muddy. Once parked, the trailhead is unmarked but clearly visible. Technically, the city calls this pocket wilderness the River Bluff Wildlife Area, so you may see other people about. To view the battlefield, you will have to walk. It's steep, so you'll need good shoes and a pair of steady legs.

Now about the battle. A KCWRT member in 1988, Geoffrey R. Walden, wrote about the fight in a short article. He said the Confederates crossed the Holston River (now the Tennessee) between November 21-23, 1863, to take the high ground south of the city to put artillery on the heights and dominate the Federals in Knoxville. If the heights just across from the city were taken, an infantry assault could be mounted to seize the pontoon bridge that crossed the river and allow the Rebels to enter the city from the south. If carried out, the Union could not have held the city, and then all of East Tennessee would be at risk.



The Confederates Attacked Across This Open Field from the Right

The Confederate forces consisted of John Bell Hood's old division now under the command of Gen Jenkins. There were two brigades of infantry – Jerome Robertson's and Evander Law's. Interestingly, these were the same two brigades that were involved in the assault on Little Round Top four months earlier at Gettysburg. The Rebels also sent over Parker's Virginia Battery of artillery with four cannons. The Confederates seized the high ground at Cherokee Heights (now covered by condominiums) and proceeded to move to the east to see what Yankees, if any, were on the next hill.

That next hill was Armstrong Hill, and on its western slope were elements of the Union XXIII Corps. The hill itself was connected by a small ridge to the hill that would become Fort Higley in the days after the battle. Armstrong Hill was lower than Cherokee Heights and both hills were heavily wooded. Between the hills was an open field about 220 yards long and about 80 yards wide at its widest point (about 10



Brian Burroughs and Taylor Jones Metal Detect Along the Probable Union Line on Armstrong Hill

acres). Now the field is a pond because a creek that ran through it was dammed after the war. At the base of Armstrong Hill was a wooden snake rail fence that ran from north to south. There was another snake rail fence that ran from east to west on either side of a lane that ran past a small log cabin on the south end of the field. Accounts differ, but there may have been another cabin at the north end of the field that was near a thicket of trees that was about 60 yards wide and backed up to the cliffs over the river.

Skirmishing took place on November 24, 1863, but the battle was fought the next day. The veteran Union troops that held the line were the 24th Kentucky in the north guarding the river approaches and the 65th Illinois directly to their south. They would soon be joined by a brand-new regiment that had never been in a battle before – the 103rd Ohio. The Buckeyes were placed at the top of Armstrong Hill and were moving to join the rest of the Union line when they were greeted by shell fire, rifle shots, and the sound of the Rebel yell. The Confederates had more men and were able to get around the left flank of the Ohioans who were pushed back to the top of the hill. There, they had a choice: break and run for their lives, or counterattack.

It's not known who gave the order, but someone did, and the 103rd regained its composure and began a counterattack that pushed the Confederates back down the hill. The Rebels used the cabin at the lane as a defensive position and inflicted a number of Union casualties before being flushed out and driven back to their original position. Similarly, in the northern part of the field, the Federals were able to push the Confederates back through the open field and the thicket to the top of Cherokee Heights, but they lacked enough force to break the Rebel defenses. As darkness fell, the battle was over.

Skirmishing continued over the next few days, but no battle ensued. All told, there were 108 Union casualties (Nine KIA) and 116 Confederate casualties (22 KIA) in the Armstrong Hill engagement. Shortly thereafter, Engineering Officer Orlando Poe laid out the position of Fort Higley. Henceforth, there would be Union artillery to contend with any Confederate movements south of the river. On November 29th, the guns of the fort were engaged but as a mere sideshow to the larger Battle of Fort Sanders across the water.

Today, the Battle of Armstrong Hill is all but unknown to most Civil War historians and students, but that's where we come in. The Roundtable was instrumental in saving the site from development a few decades ago, but much remains to be done. A family who owned the property for years altered what the ground looked like on the day of the battle, but we can identify and, just perhaps, get it close to the condition it was in on that fateful day and provide the interpretive signage necessary to understand it.



Metal artifacts found on Armstrong Hill by KCWRT members

FORT DICKERSON PARK GATEWAY KCWRT MONUMENTS PLACED

By Tom Wright



KCWRT Cannon and Monuments at Fort Dickerson Park

Since its founding in 1983, the Knoxville Civil War Roundtable has worked with the Knoxville Parks and Recreation Department to maintain, protect, and preserve the 1863 fort constructed by the Army of the Ohio's chief engineering officer, Captain Orlando Poe and named for Captain Jonathan Dickerson of the 112th Illinois Mounted Infantry who was killed in action near Cleveland, Tennessee.

In 2017, the Fort Dickerson Park Gateway was completed and gifted to the city by the Aslan Foundation. For several years, the Roundtable discussed adding a cannon to the gateway circle. In 2024, Board member Tom Wright found a replica cannon for sale by Graham Reed in Hermitage, Tennessee.

In early 2025, Tom and Sue Wright and Brian and Tammie Burroughs traveled to Middle Tennessee to see the cannon. They agreed that it would work and presented the request to the Board to pursue the purchase. The Board approved and the project moved forward.

The project was presented at the next monthly meeting and was enthusiastically received. Over the next several months, Roundtable members generously contributed funds to purchase the cannon. Over $9,000 was raised, enough to purchase the cannon and have it delivered and to have a memorial stone mounted in the circle.

Once approval was received from the City of Knoxville and the Aslan Foundation, the city installed a concrete circle for the cannon to be mounted on.

On a cold day in February 2026, the cannon was delivered by Graham Reed and an associate. Several Board members were on hand to assist with unloading and securing the cannon in its permanent location.

The latest chapter of the saga took place on September 30, 2026, when the Memorial Stones were delivered and set in place by Maryville Monument. Several Board members were on hand for this special occasion.

Now that the "Cannon Project" is completed, a dedication ceremony will be planned later this Fall. Watch your e-mail for the date and make plans to attend.

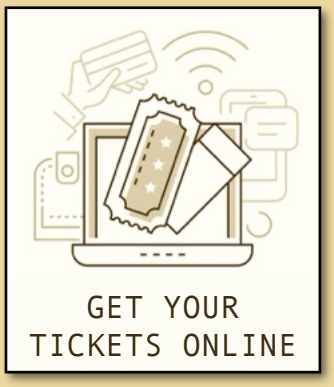
TO ALL MEMBERS

As you'll see on the next page, our director of membership, Bill Nicolai, talks about our status in getting members to pay their dues for this current fiscal year. First, my thanks to those of you who have paid on time. Now conventional wisdom says that leaders should tread lightly and not alienate those who are behind in payment. Except we've been reminding members since May about this and about 90 members still haven't paid so calling people's attention to it is justified. Frankly, it's just unfair to the organization and to those who have met their obligation. There are three easy ways to pay – at the door at a monthly membership meeting, through the mail or online. Please don't wait any longer. Thanks.

Now you can also preorder your dinner or lecture-only tickets… and avoid having to call-in your reservation

NEW OPTION THIS YEAR, by accessing our website at Knoxville Civil War Roundtable – Remembering the Civil War in East Tennessee (aka https://www.kcwrt.org) you may reserve your dinner online. This is sooo easy!

You may have noticed there are two buttons on the home page… the **JOIN/RENEW KCWRT HERE** and **RESERVE TICKETS HERE.** The "Reserve Tickets Here" may be used to buy your dinner tickets or the lecture-only ticket. That way, there is no need to pay at the door – and more importantly, **there is no need to call-in your reservation**. Just follow the prompts when you click on the link to buy your tickets… Please note that you need to buy your tickets (or call in your reservation) **by 11am on the Friday before the Tuesday meeting,** so that we can order the right amount of food for everyone. We certainly do not want to run out!



As always, feel free to contact me or Craig Brown with your questions.

Thanks, Bill Nicolai, Membership Director

IT'S TIME TO RENEW YOUR MEMBERSHIP!

Hello fellow Members of the Roundtable:

You are receiving this message because you have been a Member of the Knoxville Civil War Roundtable during the 2024-2025 or 2025-2026 fiscal years (which runs from July 1 through June 30) but according to my records, approximately 90 former members have not renewed for the current campaign.

I hope you have enjoyed the programs in the past. We added nearly 30 new Members in the last campaign. Also, we have added six new Members already this year! We encourage you to renew your Membership.

You may renew by mailing a check to the PO Box (refer to the application at the end of this newsletter), paying me at the meeting, or...**THE NEW OPTION THIS YEAR**, by accessing our website at Knoxville Civil War Roundtable – Remembering the Civil War in East Tennessee (aka https://www.kcwrt.org) and renewing online. This is sooo easy! Click on the "**JOIN/RENEW KCWRT HERE**" button. Please renew so that you do lose access to the newsletter.

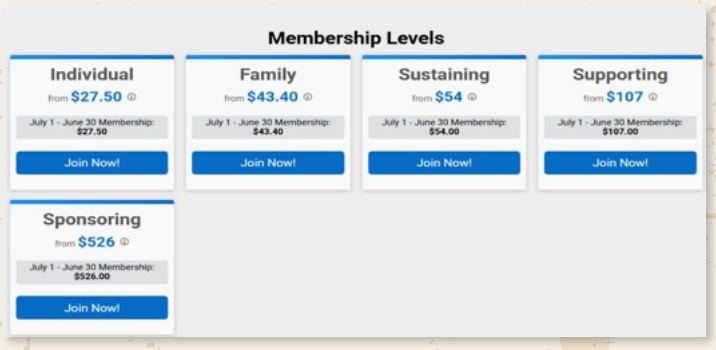
When you reach the KCWRT home page, you will see the following:



Scroll down the page:



If you click on **JOIN/RENEW KCWRT HERE**, you will see the following membership levels:



Click on your selection and follow the prompts. **Click on the "I'm new here" to complete the application.** Note that there is a service fee we have to cover when paying by credit card. We make no money on the purchase – your Membership goes toward paying for speaker travel expenses, meeting the mission and preservation efforts of the Roundtable (the two scholarships we offer, supporting the November Fort Dickerson weekend, etc.) and covering the few operating expenses we do have (website management, the newsletter, etc.).

The Board is in discussion that if you don't renew by November 1st, we may stop emailing the monthly newsletter to you. The newsletter will not be posted on the website based on this same decision. **But note that you will always have access to the website to renew anytime in the future.**

Thank you, Bill Nicolai, Membership Director

THE KNOXVILLE CIVIL WAR ROUNDTABLE 2026-2027 SPEAKERS SERIES

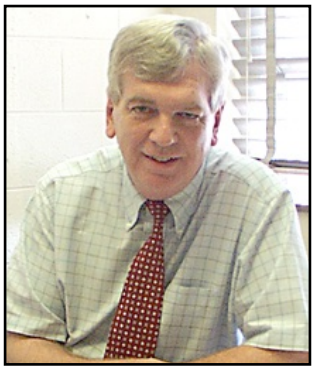
November 10, 2026 — Brian Wills, Historian & Author, *"George Thomas: The Rock of Chickamauga"*

December 8, 2026 — Jim Ogden, Chief Historian, Chickamauga & Chattanooga NMP, *"'Fighting Joe' Hooker and the Battle Above the Clouds"*



December 2026 Speaker: Jim Ogden

January 12, 2027 — Michael Van Ness, M.D., Historian & Author, *"Imprisoned at Camp Douglas: The Diary and Art of Knoxville Confederate Samuel Bell Palmer"*



January 2027 Speaker: Jim Stovall

February 9, 2027 — Jim Stovall, Historian & Author, *"The Dissenting South"*

March 9, 2027 — David Powell, Historian & Author, *"Storming Kennesaw"*

April 13, 2027 — Brian Kowell, Historian, *"The Magnificent Seven: Pook's Turtles in the Civil War"*

May 11, 2027 — Robert Girardi, Historian & Author, *Gouverneur K. Warren vs. Phil Sheridan: Five Forks and a Knife in the Back'*

June 15, 2027 — Gil Hahn, Historian & Author, *"Campaigns for the Confederate Coast"*



June 2027 Speaker: Gil Hahn

July 13, 2027 — TBA

August 10, 2027 — Kevin Donovan, Historian, *"The Court Martial of Fitz John Porter: Fair or Fixed?"*



November 2027 Speaker: Frank O'Reilly

September 14, 2027 —Juanita Leisch Jensen, Historian, *"The War Through Women's Eyes"*

October 12, 2027— Ed Gantt, Historian, TBA

November 9 — Frank O'Reilly, Historian & Author, *"Retreat from Victory: The Battle of Malvern Hill and the End of the Seven Days"*

December 14—Jim Ogden, Chief Historian, Chickamauga & Chattanooga NMP, *TBA*

Director of Membership
Knoxville Civil War Roundtable
P.O. Box 52232
Knoxville, TN 37950-2232

(Mail Application to the above address or turn in at Monthly Meeting – 2nd Tuesday each month at Bearden Banquet Hall, 5806 Kingston Pike, Knoxville, TN; 6:30 pm Buffet, 7:15 Business Meeting, 7:30 pm Speaker)
(Knoxville Civil War Roundtable Website: https://kcwrtorg.wordpress.com/)
Facebook page is: https://www.facebook.com/Knoxville-Civil-War-Roundtable-117118935033706/
Membership year is by fiscal year (1 July – 30 June)

Membership Application

Name _____ Phone (H) _____ (W) _____

Mailing Address _____

E-mail addresses you want monthly Scout's Report and other KCWRT information sent to:
_____

Name you want to be called on nametag (i.e., first name, middle name, or nickname) _____

Type Membership: Individual ($25) ☐; Family ($40) ☐ (List additional family members at bottom)
Sustaining ($50) ☐; Supporting ($100) ☐; Sponsoring ($500) ☐;
Any additional donation is welcome and will help with KCWR Programs: $_____

Occupation _____ Employer _____
Year Joined _____ Where did you first hear of KCWRT? _____

Do you have ancestors who served in the Civil War? (Yes, No, Unknown) _____

Major Civil War interests (to be used in the Roster to network with members with similar interests. Indicate specifically, if possible, a particular battle, person, unit or other interest).
_____
_____
_____

Hobbies/Clubs other than the Civil War: _____
_____

Field Trips: I am ____, am not _____ interested in field trips. If you are, for how many days?
1 day _____, 2 days ____, 4 to 7 days _____. Suggestions for field trip sites: _____

Area(s) of expertise I would be willing to share with KCWRT _____
_____
Volunteers always needed! I would be willing to volunteer in the following areas:
_____
Suggestions or comments to improve the KCWRT _____
_____
Additional Information for Family Membership. List the following below (use back if necessary):
Names, additional mailing addresses, additional email addresses, and names for nametag.

The Scout's Report of the Knoxville Civil War Roundtable

KCWRT is a non-partisan, non-profit, educational forum for promotion of knowledge, commemoration, and preservation of our American Civil War heritage. Meetings are always open and visitors are always welcome.

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The Knoxville Civil War Roundtable welcomes any person who has an interest in the American Civil War.
New Members are always welcome.
For more information, call 865-671-9001, visit our website at kcwrt.org, or email us: kcwrt1865@gmail.com

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