

Escaping into the Prison Civil War Round Table

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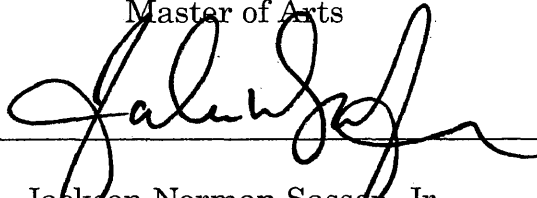
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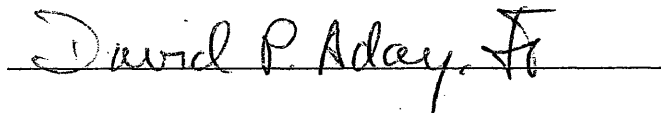
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ABSTRACT

As the first half of the twentieth century gave way to the second, Americans slowly turned their attention to the impending Civil War Centennial. Throughout the United States and beyond amateur historians began gathering to eat, drink, study, discuss, and debate in the new fora of Civil War Round Tables. Whether in the hearty groups of Chicago, Washington D.C., and Richmond, or smaller conclaves throughout the land, Round Tablers were almost exclusively white, male, and professional. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, these politically connected and highly motivated groups had a significant hand in planning the federal government's official commemoration. This effort, due in large part to its leaders from "Round Table life," brought unwelcome attention to the Centennial through controversy over segregated accommodations at the U.S. Civil War Centennial Commission's 1961 annual meeting and persistent questions about the appropriateness of so-called "sham battles." No matter one's hopes for the Centennial—and competing expectations were rife—the Centennial was quickly and emphatically judged an opportunity lost. At odds with, and in response to, such undignified remembrances was the study pursued by the Prison Civil War Round Table. Established in Virginia's maximum security Spring Street Prison in early 1962, the group was especially robust during the Centennial but went on to meet weekly until the Richmond prison closed in 1989. Under the early leadership of Stewart W. Newsom, who would be remembered not for two murder convictions but as a "Civil War Expert," and with the assistance of J. Ambler Johnston, one of Richmond's most venerated citizens and amateur historians, the Prison Civil War Round Table pursued a collaborative, broad, sustained, and, in its circumstances, unique approach to studying and remembering the Civil War. Elite Richmonders, long frustrated with more public efforts to remember the war, joined the inmates in their potent opportunity to escape from the Centennial. Their common endeavor became an antidote to the shrill, commercial, and sophomoric recollections of the war that dominated public memory in the early 1960s; their focus on history's forgotten anticipated the work of scholars to come; and their relationships and occasional rehabilitation suggest the power and possibility of historical memory.

Table of Contents

Foreword	iii
Introduction	
“The First Group of Its Kind in the Whole Civilized World”	1
Chapter One	
“Currents with Which I am Not in Sympathy”	8
Chapter Two	
“A Constant Source of Pleasure and Education”	27
Conclusion	
Monuments Great and Small	50
Bibliography	60
Vita	65

For J.B., finally

and

For C.J., everlastingly

Foreword

Southerners spend their share of time figuring out how to talk to and about the past, and what bygone days have to say about present circumstances. Though certainly not unique, their efforts too often bear a measure of pathos, abuse, or explicit manipulation. What follows is a story of one most interesting group—many Southerners, but some not—tracing their history in a serious, sustained, even affirming way. That the amateur historians I write about were inmates in the Virginia Penitentiary reminds how facile a category “Southerners” is in the context of historical memory. The Prison Civil War Round Table and its civilian supporters beyond Spring Street bridged remarkable divisions of class. They would also, in years after the Civil War Centennial, on which I focus, begin to bridge division of race within the newly desegregated Penitentiary.

For my part it's the bounty of the Southern past that catches and holds interest. I came to this project, interestingly enough, by looking for reports about John Lomax—the noted folklorist and musicologist Alan Lomax's father—visiting the Penitentiary in 1936 to record African American inmate musicians. Starting there—and ending on an all-white group of inmates discussing their forebears' role in the Civil War—is a pleasantly unsurprising comment about the breadth of Southern history. Even if, as is unquestionably true, many or even most of the details involved are less heartening.

The research and writing of this paper were not autobiographical enterprises. At least they didn't begin that way. I have never attended a Civil

War round table, never much considered attending one, and have spent the vast majority of contemplation of my peoples' role in the Civil War responding to queries about my given name. More interesting, to me, is that my paternal grandfather was named for Mr. Justice Hugo Black—born in Clay County, one county over in east central Alabama from my parents' home. This honor was bestowed, of course, before Justice Black had cemented a role as an unexpected advocate for civil rights on the high court.

The first dedication for this paper is for my other grandfather, my mother's father. Though John Billy has not been around for several years to ask about my progress, the questions echo still. Without guessing how he'd have reacted to what follows, there's no question he would have been intrigued at my discovery, some months into the research on this project, that J. Ambler Johnston's and my families are related. Our family descends, as J.B. told it, from Gideon Macon, a late-seventeenth-century resident of Williamsburg. Johnston likewise had Macons on his mother's side, and also traced roots back to the Gideon Macon whose pew sits toward the back of Bruton Parish. What's more, Johnston inherited acreage in New Kent County and a home, "Mt. Prospect," through the Macons. He wrote in early 1966: "A farm adjoining the White House property was owned by my grandfather, William H. Macon, M.D. It was named "Mt. Prospect," built about 1720, on property acquired by his ancestor, Gideon Macon in 1693."¹ The year referenced has other resonances for tidewater Virginia, of course, being the birth year of the College of William and Mary, with which I've been associated now much of my life. My wife C.J.—to whom this

¹ Johnston to Charles N. Walker, 5 January 1966, Box 1, Johnston Papers.

piece is also dedicated—and I lived less than five miles from this house when I first read these words in late 2005.

The debts accrued in the production of this modest paper are many. I will always be grateful to Mel Ely for welcoming an undergraduate into his graduate history seminar, and for his understanding students who helped bring me along. Though I inexplicably graduated once without crossing paths with Scott Nelson, the mistake won't be repeated. He has been, for more years than either of us would care to remember, an advisor and friend I cannot begin to thank. His patience with one satisfying graduate school obligations "on time" is heroic; this paper would be more poorly written or not written at all in the absence of his encouragement. I'm grateful as well to the audience members and fellow panelists at the University of Mississippi's 2005 Conference on the Civil War and the American Historical Association's 2007 meeting. The similarity of the responses at meetings geared at least in part toward "buffs," as was the former, and scholars, as was the latter, was affirming in my effort to complicate the boundaries between professionals and amateur historians. My colleagues in William and Mary's President's Office were kind to help me find the time to attend these meetings. One in particular, Jennifer Peary Blanchard, has been kind to help me find the words I needed, leave some of the others behind, and most of all move on. Her own success in like ventures is humbling.

Librarians and archivists at the College of William and Mary, the Virginia Historical Society, the James Branch Cabell Library of Virginia Commonwealth University, the Library of Virginia, and in Virginia Tech's Special Collections

were beyond helpful in the preparation of this paper. Especially key were Virginia Dunn, whose assistance in the Library of Virginia's Manuscripts Room ensured I found everything I could about the Prison Civil War Round Table, and Joyce Nester at Virginia Tech. Her invaluable help and expansive view of the hours of Tech's Special Collections made a visit to Blacksburg efficient, enjoyable, and included the much appreciated words from an archivist, "We try to keep things as simple as possible." Welcome advice on any number of fronts.

It is often, for me, an irresistible oversimplification to wonder how researchers or authors really feel about a time period or person under study. Spending considerable time with the Prison Civil War Round Table, with Johnston and Newsom and their fellows on both sides of Spring Street's walls, points up what a misguided notion that really is. Beyond finding them nearly endlessly fascinating, I am taken by a comment made by Charles Houston, the *News-Leader* columnist who visited and wrote about the PCWRT with ever-increasing frequency as the Civil War Centennial progressed: "I've never been a Civil War buff," Houston wrote in a June 11, 1965 coda to the Centennial in Richmond, "but it wouldn't be so difficult to become infected a bit now that Mr. Johnston has suggested that it might have been for more than a Lost Cause."² The work and relationships of the Prison Civil War Round Table suggest that the history and memory of the War, even in Richmond, and even during the War's Centennial, could be broader than that, too.

² "New Notion About a War," Sidelights, *Richmond News-Leader*, 11 June 1965.

Introduction: "The First Group of Its Kind in the Whole Civilized World"

On January 12, 1962, a dozen inmates of the Virginia State Penitentiary wrote to the institution's education director, J.F. Featherston. "The following named men are interested in Civil War literature," Stewart Newsom, #63646, wrote on their behalf, "and if possible desire to form a club or class for research and discussion." Featherston encouraged and focused their thinking, and two months later came a note from Newsom to Robert W. Waitt, Jr., executive director of Richmond's Civil War Centennial Committee. What they really wanted, they now knew, was a "civil war roundtable."¹

Within weeks, and continuing for almost thirty years, until the prison closed in 1989, they had one. Their group was one of many Round Tables that emerged during the Civil War Centennial, as motivated history aficionados began meeting regularly to discuss and debate the War. But the Prison Civil War Round Table was also, in the modest estimation of its founding chair, "the first group of its kind in the whole civilized world."² Conspicuous for its setting, focus, and support from "substantial citizens of the outside world," the inmate members and civilian supporters of the Prison Civil War Round Table practiced an intriguing sort of amateur history within the walls of the Spring Street

¹ "The Group" to J.F. Featherston, 16 January 1962 and Stewart W. Newsom to Robert W. Waitt, Jr., 20 March 1962, both in Prison Civil War Round Table Records, Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia (hereafter cited as PCWRT Records). The PCWRT, suggestive of their interests and seriousness of purpose, were fastidious in their recordkeeping. Three boxes of their correspondence, meeting minutes, newsletters, and ephemera, arranged chronologically, reside in the Library of Virginia.

² H. L. Paasch, 7 May 1964, PCWRT Records.

Prison.³ Reacting in large measure to what they considered the silliness of the early Centennial, they pursued and were encouraged to undertake their own brand of serious historical inquiry. Newsom, who served as the group's secretary and backbone until his death in 1970, defined the group's interests broadly from the first. He and his fellows looked forward to taking up, he wrote, "literature on the Civil War, events leading up to the war and reconstruction period, etc."⁴

The Prison Round Table's careful exploration of such broad interests made them a group apart during the Civil War Centennial. The round table tradition of which they were a part largely conformed to William D. Rubenstein's view of the "vast other-world of amateur, antiquarian, popular, and public historians who are almost invariably ignored by university historians, just as these outsiders ignored the academics."⁵ The Prison Round Table—whose membership was unmistakably circumscribed by limits real and imagined—gives the lie to the notion of the amateur as other. If, as I will suggest, the Centennial's commemoration writ large was a factory for distraction, the Prison Round Table's environment allowed them to be aware of—but not limited by—the many farcical efforts advanced during the early 1960s. Rather, members found the singularity of their mission affirming. Their supporters, well positioned to publicize their work, found in them an example worth promulgating, and following. Indeed, collaboration among the incarcerated and well-to-do during Richmond's Civil War Centennial collapsed established

³ "The Prison Civil War Round Table in memory of Stewart W. Newsom," 2 July 1970, PCWRT Records.

⁴ "The Group" to J.F. Featherston, 16 January 1962, PCWRT Records.

⁵ "History and 'Amateur' History," in *Making History: An Introduction to the History and Practices of a Discipline*, ed. Peter Lambert and Phillip R. Schofield (London: Routledge, 2004), 201.

divisions of class and craft, and blurred lines of “professional” and “amateur” history. The Prison Round Table, a most unexpected version of Plato’s cave, where reason was found in spite of challenge, begs us to revisit our understanding of Civil War round tables and their contributions.

During the 1960s the Commonwealth of Virginia housed between 1,200 and 1,400 inmates at its State Penitentiary, a facility with historic buildings, sweeping views of the city and the James River, and a prime location—hard against downtown office buildings, hotels, and highways. Designed at the turn of the nineteenth century by Benjamin Henry Latrobe and situated in the “rolling country” of western Richmond, the Penitentiary gradually became ever more a part of the city.⁶ During the 1890s, when several streets were realigned to accommodate Richmond’s growth, one of the prison yards was filled with earth excavated to make way for the Hotel Jefferson, among the South’s finest.⁷ Seventy years later, the Jefferson’s illuminated art-deco clock tower figured prominently in the evening skyline inmates enjoyed—or endured. As Alex Akers told a reporter in 1974, “I see the sun going down over the city every evening from my cell. It stinks.”⁸

⁶ Paul W. Keve, *The History of Corrections in Virginia* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1986), esp. 188-189. James M. Good, “A Brief History of the Virginia State Penitentiary,” (unpublished paper, Library of Virginia, 1973). Latrobe’s design reflected Virginia’s early approach to corrections, which called on the most progressive ideas of the day—an approach encouraged by Thomas Jefferson. The physical plant’s decline during the next century and a half likewise tracked the Commonwealth’s uneven management of and support for corrections: by the 1960s, the Penitentiary was regularly the focus of court actions, investigations, and reports pointing out “the obsolete physical plant, the untrained and thinly developed staff, and the poor management.” *Ibid.*

⁷ Mary Agnes Grant, “History of the State Penitentiary of Virginia” (master’s thesis, College of William and Mary, 1936), 65, 184.

⁸ Irene Preston, “Spring Street Prison: View from the Inside,” *Richmond*, October 1974, 18, 17. Preston asked four inmates what they thought “about the city they see every day, 365 days a year, just by looking up.” Henry L. Clere reflected on the Jefferson specifically: “Richmond is really

Despite its metropolitan setting, the State Penitentiary remained Virginia's maximum security facility well into the 1960s. During those years, in the words of George W. Todd, Jr., the Prison Civil War Round Table's adviser for more than two decades, its inmates "were not there for singing too loud in church."⁹ That's not to say they didn't sing, however; the prison offered a robust array of choices for personal and professional development, including a choir, a newspaper, and a Jaycees chapter. The Prison Civil War Round Table soon eclipsed all other educational activities in the initiative demonstrated by its members and the support offered by its advocates in the prison administration and the broader community. The group was even, on occasion, capable of giving visitors a different impression than that of their second adviser. *Richmond News-Leader* columnist Charles Houston once told his readers that "Had it not been for their prison garb, I might have mistaken this group for the Men's Bible Class of some Sunday School."¹⁰

The uses and more common misuses of the one hundredth anniversary of the Civil War throw the efforts of the Prison Civil War Round Table into sharp

beautiful. I was working at the chow hall one night, painting it. And I looked up and the city lights were all on. The Hotel Jefferson. The Holiday Inn. The cars going by. You could see them all. I stopped and looked out the window. Very melancholy. Very hopeless. I worked in there thirty days, and I never looked up again." The Jefferson was also the subject of a feature in the issue; Spring Street, by which the prison became known to locals over time, was the thoroughfare Grant refers to being extended to reach the Penitentiary in the 1890s.

⁹ George W. Todd, Jr., in discussion with the author, 22 January 2005. Todd followed J.F. Featherston, who until his sudden death on September 1, 1967, was a tremendous boon to the PCWRT. He allowed Newsom to write letters in his name to speakers and fellow enthusiasts on the outside, arranged for the privileges that allowed the group to function, and supplied envelopes so that members could mail commendations received by the Round Table to their relations. Newsom to Johnston, 28 June 1963; Featherston to Franklin Brown III, 20 May 1964; Featherston to John E. Damerall, 19 February 1965, Newsom to Gilbert Twiss, 31 October 1967, all in PCWRT Records; "Brief History of the Prison Civil War Round Table," (unpublished paper, Virginia Historical Society, 1966), 1.

¹⁰ Charles Houston, "On Freedom Behind Bars," Sidelights, *Richmond News-Leader*, 8 June 1967.

relief. It is no accident that the group came together and experienced its strongest years during the Centennial: both product of and, I argue, welcome antidote to what otherwise approached a cultural cacophony. The Centennial's opening months, "a sort of carnival midway," were marked by sham battles, pageants, and disagreements from the sincere to the ridiculous.¹¹ The Prison Civil War Round Table, meanwhile, formed and lent its example of seriousness of purpose, ecumenical interests (if not total objectivity), and lessons of cross-sectional comity to students of the war across the nation. And although their work did not turn the tide of scholarship, their approach to history and historiography did resonate with changing approaches by professional historians. Their inclination to seek out the stories of the Civil War's unsung heroes—or just its unsung—was more in vogue with professional historians with each passing year of the 1960s. It is impossible to believe that the approach failed to have a more evocative, more personal effect on the members of the PCWRT.

This thesis seeks to recover the story of the members and supporters of the Prison Civil War Round Table, and to explore what the improbable success of the group says about the Centennial and city in which it flourished. That it did succeed, whether in spite of or because of the circumstances of incarceration, lies beyond doubt. I will suggest that its progress is inseparable from the fact that it proceeded on a different trajectory than other Civil War round tables or Centennial efforts. Chapter 1 sketches the broader context of the Centennial and other round tables. I then turn, in Chapter 2, to the work of the Prison Round

¹¹ Editor's Note, *The Commonwealth* 28 no. 6 (June 1961).

Table, retaining a chronological focus. (Turnover among the group owing to realities of parole, transfer, and new inmates also encourages this chronology; few other round table newsletters carried occasional notices like the one reading “one of our longtime members had his day in court and as a result he is no longer with the group.”¹²) These years, as much for the PCWRT as its outside counterparts, found the study of the war most salient, most visceral.

The Prison Civil War Round Table was a group whose personalities and accomplishments hold, and deserve, our attention. Their work says much about the broader sweep of Civil War round tables, and suggests why emerging trends among more academically oriented historians resonated so within the profession and beyond. The PCWRT was subject to structural challenges none of their sister organizations faced; however, they benefited from unprecedented support and succor from those same groups. And although the PCWRT ceased to exist when the Virginia Penitentiary was razed in 1989, other round tables carry on today. The Richmond Round Table, for example, contemplated the Civil War’s sesquicentennial almost five years before its arrival.¹³ Nonetheless, it is almost certain, given the PCWRT’s weekly gatherings, that it yet holds an unacknowledged record as the most active round table, having held more meetings than any other before disappearing with the Spring Street Prison.¹⁴

¹² “Prison Civil War Round Table News Letter,” 1, no. 17, (February 1964) PCWRT Records.

¹³ “Commission Plans to Commemorate 150th Anniversary of Civil War,” Richmond Civil War Round Table, http://members.tripod.com/~g_cowardin/rcwrt/122006.htm (accessed 24 November 2007).

¹⁴ Some speculative totals would suggest that the PCWRT may have in fact met twice as many times as any other round table. An average of 50 meetings a year for the PCWRT’s 27 years of operation totals 1,350; the Chicago round table, the oldest, would have met approximately 650 times according to its monthly schedules. Both figures are no doubt high, as the Prison Round

Continuity and focus proved harder to come by for the Prison Civil War Round Table after the Centennial. The roster remained full, but constant turnover left only four of the fourteen founding inmates in place just a half dozen years after the group's organization. These die-hard members, led by Stewart Newsom, made the PCWRT a robust and recognized entity in its palmier days. What the Chicago Civil War Round Table had called "one of the liveliest of the round tables" in February 1966 would have its operations called "haphazard" just eight years later. By then, as the group's adviser commented on the increasingly challenging environment in which the PCWRT worked, "only the Almighty knows what will happen at the penitentiary."¹⁵ Members likely remembered with fondness a decade earlier, when the business of a Thursday afternoon was somewhat more predictable within the walls of the State Penitentiary. Predictable, yet altogether unexpected: a serious approach to study of the Civil War, quite at odds with the Centennial currently underway and the Civil War round tables who helped plan and execute the remembrance. I now turn to their work in Richmond and beyond.

Table occasionally missed meetings due to penitentiary-wide restrictions or "lockdowns" and the Chicago Round Table has not met during the summer months for much of its history.

¹⁵ "The Civil War Round Table," 26, no. 6 (February 1966); George W. Todd to Riddle, 14 February 1974, Todd to Johnston, 13 December 1973, both in PCWRT Records.

Chapter I: "Currents with Which I am Not in Sympathy"

"On it goes," Walker Percy wrote in 1961, "the second Civil War, hundreds of books, millions of words, dozens of Pickett's charges." Already weary of the heavy historiographical traffic, Percy was resigned to the years ahead. "The War was fought and the time has come to say something on the subject."¹

The conversation began, to a considerable extent, in the new breed of organizations called Civil War round tables. These groups of largely like-minded, upper-middle-class white men began to come together across the country for once-monthly lecture and argument in the 1950s and 1960s. With organizational debts and operational precedents running a spectrum from Rotary to Chambers of Commerce to Chautauquas, the round tables became a kind of proving ground for study of the war. The timing of their ascendancy was no accident, as Robert Cook affirms in his recent and much-needed history of the Civil War's Centennial. "The idea for a national commemoration of the Civil War," he writes, "originated with private American citizens, primarily 'buffs' who belonged to amateur discussion groups called Civil War round tables."² Their numbers expanded throughout the decade of the 1950s with an eye toward the commemorations ahead; many round tables' names included the term "Centennial."³

¹ "Red, White, and Blue-Gray," in *Signposts in a Strange Land*, ed. Patrick Samway (New York: The Noonday Press, 1991), 77, 78.

² Robert J. Cook, *Troubled Commemoration: The American Civil War Centennial, 1961-1965* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007), 15.

³ Richard M. Fried, *The Russians are Coming! The Russians are Coming!: Pageantry and Patriotism in Cold-War America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 123.

Given the market-driving interests of Civil War enthusiasts and the ever-increasing vogue of collective memory, it is remarkable that scholars have not more engaged the work of Civil War round tables.⁴ The groups themselves seem bound to make up for the oversight: self-published histories litter the ground. The Kentucky Civil War Round Table published books celebrating its own 15th, 20th, 25th, 30th, and 50th anniversaries. The Chicago Round Table's 50th anniversary tome, self-published and written by a member of the group (a female member, who wouldn't have been afforded membership until 1977) is not unenlightening hagiography.

This history of the Chicago Round Table, unsurprisingly, is the most substantive among the field. It was the Chicago Round Table, after all, to which the Prison and all other tables in what has been modestly termed a "worldwide movement," owed their inspiration.⁵ First imagined by bookseller Ralph G. Newman, the Chicago Round Table was a brilliant admixture of camaraderie and entrepreneurship: When Newman decided to focus his trade on the Civil War history he so enjoyed, he began inviting a few of his best customers (Carl

⁴ Observers celebrated and lamented the explosion of Civil War literature during the Centennial, which round tablers followed and purchased with enthusiasm. "Because they [round table members] have created and sustained a market for books, the shelves are full," John Y. Simon crowed. Walker Percy's dimmer view revealed his own publishing experience: he called the war "a literary Comstock lode" where anyone could "write a book, have a good time doing it, and stand a good chance of making money, which is more than most novelists can say." James I. Robertson, Jr., perhaps caught it best, saying shortly after becoming executive director of the National Centennial Commission, "We're reading more and enjoying it less." Simon, "Fifty Years of the Civil War Round Table," in *The Continuing Civil War: Essays in Honor of the Civil War Round Table of Chicago*, ed. Barbara Hughett and John Y. Simon (Chicago: Morningside, 1992), 23; Percy, "Red, White, and Blue-Gray," 77; Robertson quoted in "The Civil War Round Table" [The Chicago Newsletter] 23, no. 4 (December 1962).

⁵ Barbara Hughett, *The Civil War Round Table: Fifty Years of Scholarship and Fellowship* (Chicago: The Civil War Round Table, 1990), xv. Although today known as the Civil War Round Table of Chicago, for at least a quarter century the Chicago group proudly used no modifiers—"The Civil War Round Table." Hughett and John Y. Simon, "Preface," in *The Continuing Civil War*, 7.

Sandburg among them) to a regular discussion of the period. In his own words, “a few men wanted to share their enthusiasm and interest in this special period in our history with others who were like-minded.” This last description was affirmed by the Chicago Round Table’s early membership: “We were lawyers, old and successful and young and ambitious; bankers; businessmen; corporation heads and millionaires; successful and barely solvent merchants; and a realtor.”⁶ It was the kind of group that had earned each other’s esteem, and that of the world; when their pursuit of “scholarship, fellowship, and good life” brought their annual battlefield tour to Richmond, they were entertained by the Commonwealth’s first families, its most renowned historian, even enjoyed dinner with the Governor.⁷

The tone, approach, and seriousness of round tables varied considerably. Along with a very few other large and well-established round tables, the Chicago group took pride in being a laboratory for scholarly work in progress, welcoming a distinguished roster of academicians. Frank Vandiver, T. Harry Williams, Allan Nevins, William Hesseltine, John Hope Franklin, and Bruce Catton all came before the round table to “test ideas, expand research, interact with an

⁶ Ralph G. Newman, “The War We Remember,” in Hughett, *The Civil War Round Table*, ix; Ralph G. Newman, “Footsteps in the Corridor Behind Me: An Aged Veteran’s Recollections of Civil War II,” in *The Continuing Civil War*, 10. *The Civil War Round Table*’s second chapter is composed of biographical sketches of the group’s founders—“So much could be said about Ralph Newman!”—that demonstrate the Round Table’s homogenous membership.

⁷Newman, “The War We Remember,” x. When the Chicago Round Table journeyed to Richmond in 1959, Governor J. Lindsay Almond was among the speakers who addressed its members. When the group returned, in 1963, Johnston offered regrets that the Governor and his friends in the Prison Civil War Round Table could not join their dinner. Johnston, prepared remarks, “Evening of April 24, 1963,” PCWRT Records. The 1963 visit was also the occasion of a cocktail reception, hosted by the Richmond Civil War Round Table, that would lead to considerable internal strife. See below. Box 2, J. Ambler Johnston Papers, Ms74-012, Special Collections, University Libraries, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (hereafter referred to as Johnston Papers); Hughett, *The Civil War Round Table*, 58.

audience, and answer critics.” The New York Round Table likewise celebrated the scholars among its membership, presenting all its dues-paying members a reprint of Professor Allan Nevins’ talk “A Realistic View of the Civil War Soldier as a Fighter” in 1957.⁸

Almost all round tables, however, employed a rather broad definition of the life of the mind; ascetics they were not. round tables established ladies’ auxiliaries and called them “Camp Followers.” The Chicago group recognized both the most embarrassing pratfall and most excessive drinking on a given year’s battlefield tour. (One wonders how often the prizes, the “Confederate Purple Heart” and a flask-equipped cane, respectively, went to the same recipient.⁹) And they weren’t unaccustomed to speakers brandishing scabbards or bowie knives or horse pistols at pivotal moments in their lectures—all three made appearances in one particularly memorable 1952 talk in Chicago.¹⁰ Special touches like these may have encouraged historian James McPherson to be “distressed by the chasm between these cultures,” as he described the ranks of professional and amateur historians to the Chicago Round Table years later, “which sometime seem to speak a different language and to subscribe to a different notion of what history was all about.”¹¹ This chasm would be evident from the very first plans laid for the Civil War Centennial.

By the middle of the 1950s the Washington, D.C. Civil War Round Table was the nation’s largest, and its prime mover was founding member Karl Betts.

⁸ Cook, *Troubled Commemoration*, 19.

⁹ Hughett, *The Civil War Round Table*, 45.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ James M. McPherson, “The Two Cultures and the Civil War,” in Barbara Hughett and John Y. Simon, eds., *The Continuing Civil War*, 71-72.

Much at home in the nation's capital, and comfortable around those easy in the exercise of power—be they business or political leaders—Betts was a tireless self-promoter in the unique way of skilled and ambitious public relations professionals. It would be an understatement of some proportion to suggest that Betts was personally invested in the Centennial, and he put his mark on its early years like few others.¹² His interests, priorities, and motives were of a piece with the round table movement he mobilized to begin planning the Centennial in the late 1950s.

Betts and a dozen or so of his D.C. Round Table colleagues, together with “the heads of other powerhouse groups,” formulated first plans for a federal centennial effort at an October 9, 1956, meeting at Washington's Army Navy Club.¹³ Soon the D.C. Round Table's proposal for a Civil War Centennial Commission, backed by a \$100,000 appropriation, was introduced into the House of Representatives by the Virginia Democrat (and reliable Byrd Organization operative) William M. Tuck. While Tuck's constituents in Southside Virginia focused on implementing Massive Resistance—the movement was approaching fever pitch when President Eisenhower signed the joint resolution into law in September 1957—Betts' proposal was deemed more fitting than several other

¹² Cook, *Troubled Commemoration*, p. 22. Victor Gondos, Jr.'s *Military Affairs* article “Karl S. Betts and the War Centennial Commission” reads as much like a caring eulogy as critical analysis, but is no less revealing for it. We learn that Betts' “abiding interest in the lore of America's sanguinary internal conflict” was a welcome diversion after the 1957 death of his wife of almost four decades and that he spent “hundreds of dollars of his personal funds on necessary expenses.” 27, no. 2 (Summer, 1963): 52, 54, 51.

¹³ Robert W. Waitt, Jr., executive director of the Richmond Centennial Committee, was among those invited to the gathering. *Ibid.*, 54.

approaches urging a more narrow, more scholarly approach to the Centennial. Betts' successful lobbying would not be the final exchange on this front.¹⁴

Perhaps even more influential than his stewardship of the legislation establishing the Centennial Commission was Tuck's nomination, at the group's inaugural meeting in late December, of General Ulysses S. Grant III to be its chairman. Described by Robert Cook as a "retired super-patriot," Grant was a natural and unanimous choice thanks to his lineage, his seniority, and a conservatism that resonated with much of the Commission's membership.¹⁵ He would be joined at the helm of the CWCC the following spring by Betts himself, who campaigned for and won the job of Commission executive director. It was notable, given the ongoing contest between high-minded and lowbrow, written treatises or fantastic events, that the four other candidates considered were all eminent Civil War historians.¹⁶ Their competition with Betts was far from concluded.

¹⁴ Sen. Harry F. Byrd presided over a Virginia political operation that brooked little dissent and less consideration of the rights of African Americans during the middle twentieth century. Built during a long career in the Virginia State Senate, a term as the Commonwealth's governor, and service in the U.S. Senate, Byrd's "machine" was maintained through countless key contacts at the operative levels of Virginia's government. Exemplary of Byrd's work with Tuck was another resolution considered by the Congress earlier in 1956, the "Declaration of Constitutional Principles," or "Southern Manifesto." Typically, Byrd did not introduce the measure, though he and Sen. Strom Thurmond were its principal authors. The Resolution was signed by 101 members of Congress and every one of Virginia's delegation of a dozen. Numan V. Bartley, *The Rise of Massive Resistance: Race and Politics in the South During the 1950s* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969). Cook, *Troubled Commemoration*, 30.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 31. Tuck was not the only denizen of the Byrd Organization to play a key role in the early days of the Centennial. Governor J. Lindsay Almond carried the Commission's brief at the National Governors' Association meetings in May 1958, resulting in a unanimous resolution supporting its efforts and the creation of state commissions, which were key to the Centennial's grassroots, decentralized aspirations. So much did Almond believe in the Centennial, he wrote to fellow governors whose states were slow to establish their own commissions. *Ibid.*, 43, 67.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 36. Tuck became the Commission's vice-chair. Gondos, "Karl S. Betts," 56.

The Centennial Grant and Betts set about planning was more affirming than questioning, more opportunity than responsibility, more pageant than memorial, more, at bottom, present than past. Virginians, like many Southerners, were slow to warm to the idea at all. Virginia Senator Harry F. Byrd, still the lodestar of the Commonwealth's public sphere, was heard to say, "Why do you and I want to call attention to the Civil War? The South got the hell beat out of it."¹⁷ Betts' professional urge to make the most of anything—he was a efficient practitioner of "spin" long before it was cool—led him to take a different tack; he was among those who spawned the oft-quoted canard that "The South may have lost the War, but they will win the Centennial."¹⁸ The Virginia General Assembly's \$1.75 million appropriation, dwarfing the federal investment, suggested a serious approach.¹⁹ But to what end?

The Opening Day Program of the Commonwealth's Centennial offered none-too-subtle clues. The document was shared with Richmonders who gathered on Sunday, April 23, 1961—the one hundredth anniversary of Lee's accepting command of the Army of Northern Virginia. Bearing General Lee's portrait on the cover, the program's text began, with appropriate drama, "THE CURTAIN RISES." The heading introduced a list of eight "Purposes of the Civil War Centennial in Virginia," the first five of which began with the expected infinitives: "to honor," "to stimulate interest," "to educate," "to preserve," "to proclaim." This last spoke to "Virginia's true role in the historic struggle," a three-point revisionist's special arguing that Virginia advocated peace before the

¹⁷ Quoted in Fried, *The Russians Are Coming!*, 122.

¹⁸ Cook, *Troubled Commemoration*, 63.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 65.

war, understood its efforts during it as directly linked with the Revolution, and pressed reconciliation and goodwill from the stacking of arms at Appomattox.

More compelling still, however, are the final three “purposes,” grounded as much in the present as the past. The sixth, a cry for nationalism, hoped “to encourage the American people to rededicate themselves to the observance of the highest moral standards and to the service of their country”; the seventh, perhaps putting readers in mind of Commandments as much as purposes, hoped “to inspire all people to follow the guidance of God in the spiritual crises of life as did some of the greatest heroes of that day”; and the final charge aimed “To point out the common heritage and to emphasize the unity of this nation which has developed since the dreadful conflict.”²⁰

It was but a few weeks until the stark realities of the 1960s significantly complicated these idealized notions. A shameful turn in South Carolina, at the Civil War Centennial Commission’s April 1961 annual meeting, led to President Kennedy’s uncertain first steps into civil rights and softened the ground under Executive Director Betts’ administration.²¹ When New Jersey dispatched an integrated delegation they highlighted Betts’ and his staff’s failure to anticipate the need for desegregated facilities. His poor communication with colleagues and with superiors in Washington—and unrealistic hopes to avoid the challenge entirely—compounded the sin. Remarkably, given his background, Betts seemed unable to muster even modest damage control. When a rabidly segregationist

²⁰ “Opening Day Program: The Civil War Centennial in Virginia,” in Johnston Papers, Box 1.

²¹ Jon Wiener, “Civil War, Cold War, Civil Rights: The Civil War Centennial in Context,” in *The Memory of the Civil War in American Culture*, eds. Alice Fahs and Joan Waugh (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 238-241.

speaker imprecated Lincoln's parentage from the dais, and the South Carolina delegation "seceded" from the proceedings, Betts' fate as executive director was as much as sealed.²²

Any Commission members or observers reserving judgment after South Carolina were no doubt flummoxed three months later by an overwrought reenactment of the first Battle of Bull Run, equal parts pep rally and swap meet. Having promoted the spectacle of the "sham battle" rather unapologetically, Betts was liable to accept both the immediate accolades—some 70,000 spectators braved the late July heat to take in the show—and enduring criticism.²³ While Confederate forces overrunning Federal troops were enough to elicit a round of rebel yells from the assembled crowd (and to encourage some reenactors, previously "dead," to rise and rejoin the fray), unfortunate repercussions were the more lasting.²⁴ National and local papers alike described the crass commercialism of the event: it was as though, as would happen two generations on, Disney had proposed an amusement park on the site of ground hallowed by sacrifice.

²² The considerable early troubles of the National Civil War Centennial Commission are detailed in Fried, *The Russians Are Coming!*, 119-138; Robert Cook, "(Un)Furl That Banner: The Response of White Southerners to the Civil War Centennial of 1961-1965," *Journal of Southern History* 68, no. 4 (November 2002): 879-911, Cook, *Troubled Commemoration*, 88-119, and Wiener, "Civil War, Cold War, Civil Rights." Gondos covers the D.C. Round Table's early involvement in the national centennial efforts "Karl S. Betts," 49-70. Among the most questionable of Betts' early decisions, and an unquestionable source of enmity among Virginia's Centennial organizers, was his opposition to Virginia's commemoration of the Virginia's unsuccessful Washington Peace Conference. His reasons were no better than "not celebrating too many events," a grave political miscalculation given the importance of Tuck and other Virginians in the Centennial. Cook, *Troubled Commemoration*, 70.

²³ Fried, *The Russians are Coming!*, 125, 131.

²⁴ Joan M. Zenzen, *Battling for Manassas: The Fifty-Year Preservation Struggle at Manassas National Battlefield Park* (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998), 70-71. The experience gave rise to a National Park Service policy prohibiting reenactments on Park Service lands.

The result, in late summer, was the removal of Betts and the resulting resignation of Chair Ulysses S. Grant III. “[T]he professional historians on the Commission became Betts’ internal opposition,” writes Robert Cook. “In temperament, training, and viewpoint the parties differed widely.”²⁵ Historian Bell Irvin Wiley was among Betts’ harshest critics; in the implicit debate that began with Betts’ appointment and Wiley’s keynote address at the first national assembly of the CWCC, the pendulum finally swung from the approach of the District publicist to that of the Emory historian.²⁶ And so the round tables’ influence on the official Centennial began to ebb; no longer would the national commission be dominated by two recipients of the Washington Round Table’s Gold Medal Award.²⁷ Betts mused that his detractors would have preferred asking “scholars to brood and muse on our premises.” The ultimately successful appointments of scholars Allan Nevins and James I. Robertson, Jr. to replace Grant and Betts, respectively, suggests that he may have been correct. Gone were the promoters, hoping America’s rank and file would take up the Centennial in earnest; in their place were two scholars much interested in telling the stories of the rank and file from years past.²⁸ The Centennial, no longer a “spectator sport,” would come closer to resembling “a more high-toned, academic,

²⁵ Cook, *Troubled Commemoration*, p. 53.

²⁶ Robert Cook, “(Un)Furl That Banner,” 898; Cook, *Troubled Commemoration*, p. 34. The Commission’s first National Assembly, held in January 1958, included 15 representatives of civil war round tables, or 10 percent of all the delegates. Gondos, “Karl S. Betts,” 58. At the Second Annual National Assembly held in Richmond in April 1959, Wiley spoke on “How to Secure Cooperation of Local Groups.” Civil War Centennial Commission Program, 17 April 1959, Box 10, Richmond Civil War Round Table Archives, M186, James Branch Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond. Hereafter referred to as RCWRT Archives.

²⁷ Gondos, “Karl S. Betts,” 53.

²⁸ Betts quoted in Fried, *The Russians are Coming!*, 133.

and inclusive exercise.”²⁹ The change in command was more than the deposed Betts could handle; within months he died while giving remarks—died, according to his comrade General Grant, “of a broken heart.”³⁰

Nevins’ and Robertson’s stories help capture the complicated change afoot in both Centennial logistics and the broader study of the War. Robertson’s credentials as a student of the War’s common folk could hardly have been better; as a graduate student of Bell Wiley’s, at Emory University, he would have seen at close hand a historian equally prodigious in well-reviewed publications and speaking engagements with buffs across the country. An appreciation of Wiley published after his death titled “Uncommon Historian of the Common Soldier” noted his being named an “Honorary Life Member of the Civil War Round Table” before his Guggenheim Fellowships, appointment at Oxford, and presidency of the Southern Historical Association. He was also praised as “an active member of the Atlanta Civil War Round Table” and “one of the most popular lecturers on the Civil War Round Table circuit.”³¹

²⁹ Cook, “(Un)Furl That Banner,” 902. It is interesting to note, for one whose career helped trace the lines between amateur and professional historians’ influence, that Allan Nevins began his career as a journalist and turned to the academy without the terminal degree or graduate training that would be increasingly necessary in succeeding generations. James I. Robertson, in a quite different trajectory, has a significant graduate and scholarly record yet remains comfortable doing much work with “buffs.” I am indebted to a comment from an audience member at the 2007 American Historical Association’s Panel 41 for this insight.

²⁹ Cook, *Troubled Commemoration*, 20.

³⁰ Betts died on June 10, 1962. Gondos, “Karl S. Betts,” 70.

³¹ Grady McWhiney, “Bell Irvin Wiley: Uncommon Historian of the Common Soldier,” *Military Affairs* 44, no. 3 (October 1980): 137. Wiley’s “most distinguished contributions to Civil War literature,” *The Life of Johnny Reb: The Common Soldier of the Confederacy* and *The Life of Billy Yank: The Common Soldier of the Union*, published in 1943 and 1952, respectively, are fundamental texts in close study of the lived experience of the Civil War, and retain their popularity and impact still today.

For Robertson, a native of Danville, the appointment was a homecoming of sorts. Although only 31 at the time, Robertson's industry and energy, along with his academic pedigree, made him an ideal choice. He was also, as indicated by a warm relationship with J. Ambler Johnston, more than suitably connected among local amateur historians. "One of this writer's most cherished possessions," Robertson would write in a Virginia Tech magazine, Johnston's alma mater and Robertson's professional home for decades, "is a close relationship with J. Ambler Johnston."³² In all likelihood, Johnston was among the first to hear the stump speech with which Robertson hit the round table speaking circuit. It was titled "The Lagging Civil War Centennial."³³

Such a conclusion no doubt sat heavy on the hearts of those who, like the Richmond Civil War Round Table, had worked for a very different commemoration. As Karl Betts might have put it, the Commonwealth of Virginia was as central a part of the Centennial as it was during the war itself. Richmonders participated in the earliest discussions to organize the Centennial. The first southern state to establish its own Centennial Commission, and the only one to appropriate a "massive" funding stream, by November 1959, 25 of its 31 cities and 50 of 98 counties had their own commemorative bodies.³⁴ All the same, with less than half of the Centennial concluded, the war and their

³² James I. Robertson, Jr., foreword to "Living History' in Action': Tech Alumni Reminisce," *Context*, 7, no. 1 (Autumn 1972): 18.

³³ When Robertson's talk was reviewed in the newsletter of the Chicago Civil War Round Table, the facing column mentioned an endeavor that better reflected the Commission's aspirations for the centennial—a round table in the Virginia Penitentiary. The granddaddy of all Round Tables pronounced that the Prison group's News Letter "compares well with other newsletters of the CWRT circuit." "The Civil War Round Table" 23, no. 4 (December 1962).

³⁴ Cook, *Troubled Commemoration*, 65, 74.

forebears' memories had been trampled under by public relations, commercialism, and politics.

Richmonders had hoped it would be otherwise. C. Hobson Goddin, in a departing memo after a year as president of the Richmond Civil War Round Table on “the eve of the Commemoration of the War Between the States,” called for a “dignified approach . . . it is up to the round tables and their members to lead the way and we of the Richmond Round Table have taken the initiative in and around this Capital City.” Ambler Johnston brought the same focus to the Richmond Centennial Commission as its chair: “Right in the beginning,” he reflected as the centennial drew to a close, “we decided that we were not going to have any popcorn and peanuts, parades and sham battles, but would bring out some literature about Richmond’s role in the Civil War that would just go into oblivion otherwise.”³⁵ Johnston barely managed to disguise his disappointment that others failed to share this seriousness of purpose.

The Richmond Round Table’s majestic pronouncements were more aspiration than assessment. When Louis D. Rubin, Jr. served as James Jackson Kilpatrick’s associate editor at the *Richmond News-Leader* in the mid-1950s, he

³⁵ Goddin, untitled report, n.d., Box 1, Folder 2, RCWRT Archives. Linda Anne Murphy, “Centennial Archives Urged,” *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, 9 November 1965. The Richmond Centennial Commission, the only municipal group to receive the National CWCC’s highest recognition (the “Centennial Medallion”) was routinely praised as superior to many state organizations. The National Commission’s wrap up report praised the raft of lesser publications along with *Richmond at War*, an edited volume of Civil War sources including City Council minutes, newspaper reports, and biographical sketches. The volume was reviewed by Virginius Dabney in the *Times Dispatch* and, of course, James Robertson in the *News-Leader*, who wrote, “It is fitting that this volume should be the capstone of an unsurpassed program by the nation’s most successful—and respected—local commemorative agency.” *The Civil War Centennial: A Report to the Congress* (Washington, D.C., U.S. Civil War Centennial Commission, 1968), copy in Box 3, . James I. Robertson, “Tribute to Richmond: Council Minutes Reveal City at War,” *Richmond News Leader*, 19 January 1967.

sometimes visited the Richmond Round Table. Rubin struggled to comport his world view with that of Kilpatrick—the Prince of Interposition and favorite son of Harry Byrd and bitter-enders throughout the south. (Kilpatrick’s editorials promoting Massive Resistance to school desegregation and reviving the facile constitutional notion of “nullification” were approaching full cry as Rubin arrived.) If he was of broader mind than some Southerners, however, Rubin was not untouched by the region’s past. A visitor to Richmond’s Confederate Home as a child and a would-be biographer of General Longstreet as a young adult, Rubin acknowledged that “there was a time when I too fancied myself a latter-day Wearer of the Gray and viewed the Fall of Richmond as a replication of the Fall of Man.”³⁶ Reflecting on his experience after a half century, Rubin recalled others among the Richmond Round Table who were more serious still:

As might have been expected, the participants in the roundtable tended toward the Virginia school of Civil War interpretation and were ardent advocates of the Lee-Jackson-Stuart trinitarian approach. . . . their enthusiasm for the Lost Cause was not always accompanied by an oversupply of information. Several came to meetings dressed in Confederate uniforms.³⁷

Rubin lived, for a few meetings at least, the reality prescribed when Walker Percy concluded that “the bitterest fruits of defeat are the latter-day defenders of the lost cause.”³⁸

Exuberance was but one possible distraction from serious study of the War. Even those most likely to demand a professional and respectful Centennial became mired in discussion—or debate, or worse—about trappings that attended

³⁶ Louis D. Rubin, Jr., “General Longstreet and Me: Refighting the Civil War,” *Southern Cultures*, Spring 2002: 22.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 37-38.

³⁸ Percy, “Red, White, and Blue-Gray,” 80.

the Commemoration. During the late spring of 1963 Richmond Round Table members spent much time and ink debating the high matter of who paid for a cocktail party. Bill Stauffer (a round tabler cited by Rubin as an exception to the lack of graduate education among the group) wrote Ambler Johnston on 21 May 1963 lamenting the confusion over payment. He also implied that Johnston had caused the misunderstanding, which was particularly vexing since the Chicago Round Table newsletter had already announced that the Richmond group intended to host a reception in the Chicagoans' honor.³⁹ Given the wide circulation of the Chicago newsletter, Richmond's distinction as a site for Civil War tourism, and the fact that manners were at stake—it was no small matter. “Damage enough has been done by the ill-advised item in the Chicago Newsletter,” Stauffer wrote, and Johnston viewed the disagreement with like alarm, drafting a three-page response that quoted from round table minutes, referred to “hurt feelings” and a “slap in the face,” and concluded that “there are currents within the Richmond Table with which I am not in sympathy.” After sleeping on his 28 May draft, Johnston returned to gentlemanly form and replied that “the best way to discuss the subject of your letter is before an open fire with the bottle of REBEL YELL conveniently alongside.” After all, as Johnston reminded his longtime friend, “The Civil War Round Table should be for exchange of thought and good feeling.”⁴⁰

³⁹ The reception was held at Richmond's Commonwealth Club. “The Civil War Round Table,” 23, *Battlefield Tour Number* (April, 1963).

⁴⁰ William H. Stauffer to J. Ambler Johnston, 21 May 1963, Johnston to Stauffer, marked “rough draft,” 28 May 1963; and Johnston to Stauffer, 29 May, 1963, all in Johnston Papers, Box 1.

And so it often was—whether through libation or ecclesiastical callings. It suggests the level of adventure most round tables embraced to recall that among the Richmond Round Table’s chief accomplishments during the Centennial was the dedication of a stained-glass window to the memory of Captain Sally Tompkins at Richmond’s St. James Episcopal Church. Tompkins, whose valor in caring for Confederate wounded in Richmond led to a commission in the C.S.A. Calvary—the only woman so recognized during the war—was honored with a window whose every detail was fretted over for months. C. Hobson Goddin, president of the Richmond Round Table, in a steady correspondence with Edwin P. Conquest, chair of the Memorial Window Committee, parsed carefully the most appropriate battles to be listed in recognition of Tompkins’ service (he suggested substituting Gaines Mill and Malvern Hill for Harper’s Ferry and Seven Days). Conquest was convinced, and shared this in addition to an amendment to an anchor pictured in the window. It should have no “top bar,” in the fashion of “Yankee anchors,” Conquest wrote the studio in the ninth of 10 requests. “We want Captain Sally’s memorial to be strictly Confederate.” From a year’s distance, the Tompkins window dedicated, Goddin wrote Conquest a note of congratulations. Reflecting on the dedication, “simple and dignified,” Goddin suggested that “[i]t is accomplishments such as these that we should encourage in the commemoration of our Civil War Centennial.”⁴¹

⁴¹ C. Hobson Goddin to Edwin P. Conquest, 5 October 1960; “Memorandum,” C. Hobson Goddin to Edwin P. Conquest, n.d.; Edwin P. Conquest to The J. and R. Lamb Studios, 17 February 1961, page 2. All in Box 1, Folder 2, RCWRT Archives. Ron Maggiano, “Captain Sally Tompkins: Angel of the Confederacy,” *OAH Magazine of History* 16 (Winter, 2002), <http://www.oah.org/pubs/magazine/publichistory/maggiano.html>, viewed 10 December 2006.

The Civil War buffs who composed the Richmond Round table also spent time, as the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* recalled, “researching, collecting, and publishing since 1959 a sea of literature on the role of Richmond in the Civil War.” It also pointed to the Prison Civil War Round Table as a signal accomplishment of the centennial years.⁴² What’s more, the Richmond Table occasionally found itself collaborating with eminent historians. In 1971, while working on an annotated version of John O. Casler’s *Four Years in the Stonewall Brigade*, James I. Robertson, Jr. wrote his comrade J. Ambler Johnston with a “riddle . . . that you and your many Richmond friends-historians might like to toss around.” Within the week Robertson had a response from Roland Galvin, secretary of the Richmond Round Table, passing along an additional citation to the events in question, Confederate soldiers’ voting a portion of their rations to Richmond’s starving poor in late May 1864.⁴³

In addition to help like this, the amateurs among Richmond round tablers did publish, from time to time, original research themselves. Johnston’s short essay, “Not Forgotten: Henry Gintzberger, Private, C.S.A.” was such a piece, originating as a talk to the Prison Civil War Round Table. The article is a winning amalgam of the scholarly and amateur’s approach, ably footnoted but

C. Hobson Goddin to Edwin P. Conquest, 12 September 1961, Box 1, Folder 2, RCWRT Archives.

⁴² Virginius Dabney, “A Fine Contribution to our Knowledge of Richmond,” *Richmond Times Dispatch*, 5 December 1966; James I. Robertson, “Tribute to Richmond: Council Minutes Reveal City at War,” *Richmond News Leader*, 19 January 1967; *Richmond at War: The Minutes of the City Council*, ed. Louis H. Manarin (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1966). Manarin visited the PCWRT on many occasions.

⁴³ James I. Robertson, Jr. to J. Ambler Johnston, 13 January 1971; Roland Galvin to James I. Robertson, 18 January 1971; both in Box 1, Folder 3, RCWRT Archives. Three years later, Robertson wrote with another query. “If any blank spots remain,” he assured Galvin, “rest assured that I will seek the aid of both yourself and the Round Table.” James I. Robertson Jr. to Roland Galvin, 7 January 1974, Box 2, Folder 2, RCWRT Archives.

also depending, in part, on testimony from Johnston's father, who fought alongside Gintzberger. More interesting still is Johnston's unselfconsciously quoting himself, even pivoting between the third and first person: "J. Ambler Johnston, who did the research on Henry Gintzberger, began the research 'many years ago, and for no reason except curiosity. I wanted to find the grave.'" A detective story with real-world results, as we learn in a coda to the article: Private Gintzberger's memorial in the Confederate section of Richmond's Hebrew Cemetery has been amended from its previous "Henry Gersberg."⁴⁴ Johnston's piece, and the story behind it, became the source of some of the Prison Civil War Round Table's most evocative reviews. When he brought his research to the Penitentiary, he titled the talk "The Plain," or "Unimportant People." When the Prison Round Table reviewed the talk, its "News Letter" asked, "A plain man? Perhaps. Unimportant? We think not."⁴⁵

Plainness had an altogether new appeal eighteen months into the Civil War Centennial. If an unadorned, back-to-basics approach to the study of the war had not existed, frustrated organizers and community leaders in Richmond would have been called upon to create it. But it did exist—within the walls of the Virginia State Penitentiary—and city fathers quickly and enthusiastically lent support and counsel. The work of Stewart Newsom and his colleagues was a welcome reprieve both on the level of focus and organization—distractions were rather less common at Spring Street, at least those of the faux Confederate

⁴⁴ J. Ambler Johnston, "Not Forgotten: Henry Gintzberger, Private, C.S.A," *The Journal of the Southern Jewish Historical Society* 1, no. 3 (November 1963), 8. Copy in Johnston Papers, Box 2.

⁴⁵ "Prison Civil War Round Table News Letter," v. 1, no. 15 (December 1963).

uniform, cocktail party controversy, or stained-glass window variety—and in the interests they brought to bear on the subject. It was (and to a striking extent, remains) axiomatic that Civil War round tables were chiefly interested in the battle itself. It was perhaps the easiest, most accessible door into the War, in Robert Penn Warren's phrase, "our only felt history, history lived in the . . . imagination."⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Robert Penn Warren, *The Legacy of the Civil War* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1961): 4.

Chapter II: "A Constant Source of Pleasure and Education"

James Geary, executive director of the Virginia Civil War Centennial Commission, summarized the commemoration in a letter to the Prison Civil War Round Table just weeks after its conclusion. "Sometimes I wonder," he wrote, "how often I and many others who have participated in these events stop with a catch in our throats as we have some reminder of these years we too, in a sense, rode with Stonewall and camped with Lee."¹ The Prison Round Table's members, while producing nothing that approached the pathos of that reverie, were not uninterested in the fighting itself. And their interests did not stop there. They were indefatigable in their careful study, and more inclined than their fellows on the outside to take a broad view in their consideration of the War, and more likely to consider the period through the perspective of the "plain man." Both of these latter motivations would prove prescient among professional historians. And all three were great solace in a time when solace was in some demand, to other Richmond Civil War buffs. One senses that Goddin, Johnston, and their fellows escaped, like the criminals scared straight by the free world in *Raising Arizona*, into the "study and discussion" sought by the members of the PCWRT at the Virginia State Penitentiary.

Stewart Newsom, who would prove the PCWRT's guiding spirit over the years, and his fellows wasted little time in making the most of their round table. A month after their January 1962 letter to Robert W. Waitt, Jr., Waitt and three members of the Richmond Round Table visited the Penitentiary to help "arrange

¹ Geary to Prison Civil War Round Table, 31 July 1965, PCWRT Records.

procedure”; a month later, the Prison Round Table entertained its first guest speaker, J. Ambler Johnston, the chair of the Richmond Centennial Commission; in six months’ time the inmates were publishing a newsletter that was the envy of almost any round table; in a year their library numbered more than 100 volumes; in three years, including maps, it would approach 1,000 holdings.² Meeting every Thursday at 3:00 p.m. in the Penitentiary’s school building, twenty inmates, a number mandated by available space and the group’s constitution, would gather and hear a talk given either by a member of the group or an outside historian or amateur enthusiast, who participated in about one in three meetings during the 1960s.³ Speakers rarely received any quarter; a lively and well-informed question and answer session followed each talk. Most guest speakers were enough impressed with the round table to return, some became regulars, a few even brought brownies—until the superintendent put a stop to it.⁴

Detailed attendance records exist for the 150 meetings of the Prison Civil War Round Table during the Centennial, or from May 1962 through April 1965.

² The Prison Round Table took much pride in their classroom, and library, for which they solicited resources—“any and all reference material, battle maps, diagrams”—in their first letter to Waitt. Within two years the round table had accrued a significant library, a glass “museum case” and a number of artifacts to fill it. The privilege of maintaining such a space as they wished was unique in the Penitentiary as far as I can tell. W. Fitzhugh Brundage suggest the important crossroads of historical memory and one’s surroundings, writing that “The ability to occupy, use, and control one’s physical surroundings is an essential measure of both personal freedom and collective power.” The PCWRT library reflects the group’s impact. Newsom to Waitt, 20 March 1962, PCWRT Records; J. Ambler Johnston to Prison Civil War Round Table, 28 April 1964, Box 1, Johnston Papers; Brundage, *The Southern Past: A Clash of Race and Memory* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005), 6.

³ The PCWRT maintained a waiting list throughout the 1960s. “The Prison Civil War Round Table,” 1 May 1969, PCWRT Records. Other round tables meet monthly. Jerry Buck, “Civil War Round Table Meets Behind Bars,” *Newport News Daily Press*, 16 April 1963.

⁴ From their infancy Civil War round tables were renowned “tough rooms.” Al Weisman wrote in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* after attending a 1947 of the Chicago Round Table that “every man present is an expert on some battle or period of the war and can make it rough on any speaker who gets a little loose with his facts.” Quoted in Barbara Hughtett, *The Civil War Round Table*, 20.

An average of seventeen inmates attended these meetings; roughly half were Virginians, a third hailed from the North or the West, and fifteen percent were from other Southern states. A one-line analysis of the group's 1963 elections captures the group's ecumenical flavor: "One Yank, Two Rebs and no bloodshed."⁵ During the Centennial years eleven inmates were paroled and eight were transferred to other institutions. It is difficult to imagine other round tables managing their attendance as carefully; and while they were no doubt of interest to the Penitentiary administration, they also had probative value outlined in the PCWRT Constitution. Seven members were dropped for failing to meet their attendance requirements during the three years in question.⁶

The Prison Civil War Round Table gathered four times to every one meeting of more traditional round tables, and did so without the cocktails and supper such groups considered mandatory.⁷ They were also exceptional in their breadth of inquiry, based on responses a young graduate student named Stephen Ambrose solicited for one of his earliest scholarly publications (and to this day

⁵ "Prison Civil War Round Table News Letter," 1, no. 8 (May / June 1963), PCWRT Records.

⁶ "Class Attendance Record, Civil War Round Table, May '62 – Sept. '62," "Class Attendance Record, Civil War Round Table, Oct. '62 – Feb. '63," "Class Attendance Record, Civil War Round Table, March '63 – August '63," "Class Attendance Record, Civil War Round Table, Aug. '63 – Jan. '64," "Class Attendance Record, Civil War Round Table, Jan. '64 – June '64," "Class Attendance Record, Civil War Round Table, June '64 – Nov. '64," "Class Attendance Record, Civil War Round Table, Dec. '64 – Apr. '65," all in PCWRT Records. Attendance records were kept according to membership rosters for five or six month periods. Seven such periods cover the years from May 1862 to May 1865; the average attendance at meetings trended upward as the PCWRT found a firmer footing (15.42; 15.42; 16.8; 16.9; 18.3; 15.7; 18.9). Most inmates' home states were listed alongside their names in the rolls; I counted each discrete mention of a member to give an aggregate picture of the group's provenance. (I used the former states of the Confederacy to capture the "South.") The totals were Virginians, 69; Southerners, 18; Inmates from the North or West, 33. Stewart Newsom missed one meeting during the three-year period.

⁷ Round tables typically met once a month, except during the summer, when many did not meet at all. "The Prison Civil War Round Table has been meeting every week during the vacation time." Memo to Members, RCWRT Archives, 9 August 1969. Richmond's practice of inviting spouses (almost all wives, of course) to one meeting a year was adopted by many groups, as well. Cook, *Troubled Commemoration*, 18-19.

the only one focused on “round table life”). Writing three years before the PCWRT was established, he suggested that “[a]ll the round tables have concentrated on battles and campaigns—they have had little time for Civil War politics.”⁸ In the Virginia Penitentiary, it wasn’t so. In the talks they solicited from guest speakers, and the lectures assiduously prepared by the members themselves, the PCWRT matched breadth with depth. For example, in the PCWRT’s December 1962 *News Letter*, editor Bud Grove posits that much of an upcoming panel on “Legal Aspects of the Civil War” planned by the Chicago Round Table had already been enjoyed at the Penitentiary—when he spoke in May. Mixed in with talks on Gettysburg and Chancellorsville were examinations of “Newspaper Battles of the Civil War,” “Reconstruction in North Carolina,” and “The Science of the Civil War.”⁹

While it is difficult to compare the subjects taken up by the PCWRT and other tables, there are compelling suggestions in the records that the inmates had a wider aperture than was common among amateur students of the war. Although not in a position to directly affect the topics addressed by their visitors, the Round Table could on occasion make requests. When Randolph-Macon College embarked on a plan for the most capable among its senior history majors to address the PCWRT, Newsom forwarded a list of ten proposed topics. Colonel

⁸ “The Civil War Round Tables,” *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 42, no. 4 (Summer, 1959), 258. Ambrose’s article is a jaunty review of the “almost 50 replies” he received to his questionnaire on round tables, “the heart and soul of America’s new fascination with the Civil War.” Cook affirms the verdict a half century later that a round table talk was “normally one with a military emphasis.” *Troubled Commemoration*, 19.

⁹ Most round tables did not meet during the summer months. Only penitentiary-wide lockdowns, which did become more frequent in the late 1960s and early 1970s, precluded the PCWRT’s weekly meetings. “Civil War Round Table Organizational Guide,” (Civil War Round Table Associates, 1972), 1, copy in Box 3, Johnston Papers.

Mosby made his appearance, as did the ever-popular siege of Petersburg. But alongside the more searching military topics—the battle of Nashville, spies for the North and South, and transportation and hospitals in the Civil War—were “Party Politics during the Civil War” and “Civilian Life during the Civil War.”¹⁰ And when their own members spoke, the results were even more interesting. On September 13, 1962, the minutes tell us that Newsom spoke on “the man in the ranks during the Civil War and what groups in civil life he was drawn from.”¹¹ The PCWRT was not content, as were its brother organizations, Ambrose found, to “refight battles, condemn erring officials . . . and praise distinguished generals in both Blue and Gray.”¹²

Members of the Richmond Civil War Round Table visited the Penitentiary group throughout the summer of 1962 and reported their satisfaction with its seriousness of purpose. “Most of these men would show up well in Civil War study groups in the country,” the Richmond newsletter reported in September, “and we hope that they will affiliate themselves with round tables . . . when they leave the institution.” James I. Robertson, who in addition to his service as executive director of the Civil War Centennial Commission may have addressed more Civil War round tables than anyone—ever—compares the scholarship of the PCWRT quite favorably with its outside counterparts: “At least equal,” he remembers, “probably superior to many, but at least equal to them all.”

Compliments like this allowed the group to assert in its 20th anniversary edition

¹⁰ Stewart W. Newsom to Rev. Richard L. Morris, 31 October 1963, PCWRT Records.

¹¹ PCWRT Minutes, 13 September 1962, PCWRT Records.

¹² “The Civil War Round Tables,” 257.

News Letter that the Round Table had become “a respectable part of the intellectual community.”¹³

Since round tables practiced a Baptist polity familiar to many of their members—each group, while motivated by a common faith in their endeavor, was empowered to conduct its own affairs absent a coordinating hierarchy—their “community” was cemented through the constant exchange of correspondence and newsletters. These writings were especially important, of course, for the PCWRT. Newsom, the Round Table’s secretary, was a tireless letter writer, here pointing out a new publication in a correspondent’s area of interest, there offering a gentle correction to something published in error. The intellectual exchange and relationships—built on respect but conducted at some distance, even internationally—were important enough to withstand administrative challenges. When the Penitentiary restricted inmates’ mail, the PCWRT’s correspondence proceeded uninterrupted: sponsor J.F. Featherston signed letters composed in Newsom’s style, type, and bearing the indicia of his initials. One such letter begins in a way that suggests Featherston had little interest in disguising the ruse: “In view of your special interest in the troop movements from Spotsylvania to the North Anna and the Old Telegraph Road,” he writes, “the Round Table’s secretary Stewart Newsom has suggested, for what it’s worth, that I bring the following to your attention.”¹⁴ Just a few years prior, as

¹³ “Richmond Civil War Round Table Newsletter,” V, Third Quarter (September 1962), 5, copy in Box 1, Johnston Papers; James I. Robertson, Jr., in discussion with the author, 22 October 2004; “The Prison Civil War Round Table News Letter: 20th Anniversary Edition,” PCWRT Records.

¹⁴ J.F. Featherston to John E. Damerel, 20 October 1964, PCWRT Records. During the spring of 1963, Bud Grove, editor of the PCWRT News Letter, exchanged letters with his counterpart in England’s Confederate Historical Society. “I would be glad to have your comments” on the first

inmates were beginning their organization, they needed the staff to speak for them. Newsom and his fellows had now attained sufficient trust and expertise to speak for the staff.

The Prison Civil War Round Table, in keeping with the fulfillment afforded by their association, were somewhat evangelical in sharing it. They were mindful of publicizing their efforts and, with the help of their advisers on the outside, quite adept at accomplishing it. Ambler Johnston's first visit was also the occasion of the PCWRT's first of many appearances in the press. Rush Loving, Jr.'s article in the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, titled "Buffs Behind Bars," speaks with reverence of the group's attentiveness, searching questions, and impressive background knowledge. It was accompanied by a photograph of Johnston lecturing that gives the impression of a college history class with older than average students.¹⁵ Within weeks the group had responded to a request from the Chicago group on the details of its founding and operation, and it would prove zealous in sharing its accomplishments with publications like the *Civil War Times Illustrated*.¹⁶

The Prison Round Table was most keen to describe the rehabilitative appeal of their work. They and seemingly every visitor to the Penitentiary's Classroom Three considered their efforts a breakthrough in penology. "We believe that a co-operative hobby of this nature is very beneficial to a person in

two editions of the C.H.S. journal, wrote Sec. Kenneth M. Broughton. Grove to Broughton, 22 March 1963; Broughton to Grove, 8 April 1963, in PCWRT Records.

¹⁵ *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, 25 May 1962.

¹⁶ Newsom to Gilbert Twiss, Editor, *The Civil War Round Table*, 8 June 1962, PCWRT Records; Newsom to Robert H. Fowler, Editor, *Civil War Times Illustrated*, 3 January 1964, PCWRT Records.

confinement,” Newsom wrote to the editor of the *Civil War Times Illustrated*, blurring the lines of their experience and their experience of the war. “It is educational in many ways and keeps you in contact with things outside the environs of the prison.”¹⁷ The principal outsider with whom they were in contact, Johnston, was of the same mind. He highlighted the PCWRT’s successes in a three-page letter when Penitentiary administrators were under fire in 1966. “Morale has been engendered which we are told has brought a new vision to many,” Johnston wrote, and gave three anonymous examples of former PCWRT members—“old grad[s]”—who had returned to their communities as changed people after being paroled.¹⁸

George Todd’s long career in corrections and close contact with the PCWRT over almost twenty years well prepared him to judge the efficacy of their work. “There was always an element in mind of ‘How much of this is a con job?’” he admitted, “but they were about what they were about. It was a really terrific rehabilitative endeavor.”¹⁹ Newsom and company shared the same message with fellow inmates across the country, including a group in the Maryland Correctional Institution had followed their example and established the second prison round table. They wrote with good wishes and duplicate publications.

¹⁷ Newsom to Robert H. Fowler, 3 January 1964, PCWRT Records. Newsom was also cited posthumously as an example of the Prison Round Table’s potential. “If a man of such humble station could influence such a diversity of peoples: inmates, penal authorities and citizens, it proves that lines of communication can be opened and that a person no matter what his circumstances can be reintegrated into the mainstream of society.” “The Prison Civil War Round Table in Memory of Stewart W. Newsom,” 2 July 1970, PCWRT Records.

¹⁸ Johnston to E.W. Gregory, 15 December 1966, Box 2, Johnston Papers.

¹⁹ George W. Todd, Jr., in discussion with the author, 22 January 2005.

“Ours,” Newsom wrote of his round table, “has been a constant source of pleasure and education.”²⁰

The Prison Civil War Round Table *News Letter* betrayed the pride its members took in the group. When the *CWRT Associate’s Organizational Guide* posited that “RT newsletters, which at one time were intended for individual members only and were used mostly for meeting notices, have now become an important part of RT life,” it could have added that the PCWRT exemplified the trend more than most. In its careful layout (redesigned every 18 months or so), professional printing (courtesy of a supportive print shop supervisor and several watchful PCWRT members assigned there), attention to new scholarship, and thoughtful reportage on its own activities—to include frequent and affectionate mentions of its benefactors—the Prison Civil War Round Table *News Letter* had few peers. The November 1963 edition was typically fulsome, with an analysis of an article by David Donald of Johns Hopkins University, a review of recent activities by the Vanderburg Court House Round Table, a précis of a talk the group heard on Pickett’s Charge, and a reminder to PCWRT members to return their library books. Even the PCWRT’s discretion in choosing a title for their bulletin—The Prison Civil War Round Table *News Letter*—bespoke their seriousness. Far too few of their sister organizations avoided the sins of unfortunate allusions or misplaced puns, as in Lynchburg’s *The Skirmish Line*,

²⁰ “Convicts Comprise Civil War Buff Unit,” *The Washington Post*, 24 January 1965; Newsom to Antietam Civil War Round Table, 12 February 1964, PCWRT Records.

The Ramrod, originating in Denver, Colorado, and, remarkably, both the *Minie Bullet-in* (Greater Toledo, Ohio) and the *Minie Bawl* (La Salle, Indiana).²¹

During its first decade, the table was assisted by a core contingent of a half-dozen of Richmond's most notable citizens. J. Ambler Johnston led this group and typified its importance within Richmond social and historical circles. An architect who designed many of the buildings of both Virginia Tech and the University of Richmond,²² Johnston spent many Sunday afternoons exploring Richmond's battlefields with his close friend Douglas Southall Freeman during the 1920s and 1930s. After Freeman's death, in the words of one Richmond columnist, Johnston's "word [was] the last on many aspects" of the War, whose battlefields he knew "better than General Lee ever knew them." With his Confederate forebears and "unlimited contacts"—Johnston was the last living founding member of both the Southern Historical Society and the Richmond Rotary Club—he well represented both his city's allegiance to past and present possibilities.²³

The variety of titles with which Johnston was bestowed during his twelve-year association with the Prison Civil War Round Table helps capture the liminal role outside advisers played in the life of the group. Careful to ensure

²¹ "Civil War Round Table Organizational Guide," 5. "Prison Civil War Round Table News Letter" I, no. 14 (November 1963), PCWRT Records.

²² "Actually," the *Richmond News-Leader's* business reporter wrote in 1955, "the history of Ambler Johnston is the story of architecture here." To that point Johnston's firm had designed "1,334 commercial and public structures." William Bien, "The Johnston in Carneal & Johnston," 27 June 1955.

²³ "Johnston, James Ambler," in Richard Lee Morton, ed., *Virginia Lives: The Old Dominion Who's Who* (Hopkinsville, Kentucky: Historical Record Association, 1964), 519; "Report of Carneal, Johnston & Wright," Box 3, Johnston Papers; "J. Ambler Johnston," (Forum Club Obituary), Box 3, Johnston Papers; Charles Houston, "No Turkey at Home," Sidelights, *Richmond News-Leader*, 22 May 1969.

that the inmates were credited with the establishment of their group, Johnston frequently corrected those who called him a “founder”; he most favored the title “Field Representative.”²⁴ Even more revealing was the assiduousness—both in and out of the PCWRT’s knowledge—with which he asked those introducing him or writing about him to mention the Prison Civil War Round Table. Typical were notes he prepared, upon request, for an introduction for a 1968 talk. They concluded: “Is an HONORARY member of the Civil War Round Tables in Richmond, New York, Chicago, Kansas City, Louisville, London, England and of the one in which he takes most pleasure, the Civil War Round Table in the VIRGINIA STATE PENITENTIARY.” The emphasis was Johnston’s own.²⁵

The members of the Prison Civil War Round Table also took much pride in their relationships with some of Richmond’s civic leaders. Through the mails and for at least an hour a week, they were not just a number but a name—and often a face, a handshake, a friend, a colleague.²⁶ The unique quality of this opportunity was not lost on the inmates. Reviewing the tradition of the Round Table’s annual Christmas party, which regularly brought as many as fifteen to twenty outside supporters to the Penitentiary, the *News Letter’s* editor reflected, “It is very heartwarming for the membership to know and be associated with men of such caliber. Perhaps this association will be conducive to a reevaluation

²⁴ Johnston to Gilbert Twiss, 19 July 1968, Box 2, Johnston Papers. The PCWRT presented Johnston with its “Distinguished Service Award” in May 1965 and elected him an honorary member in December of that year. “I was unable to say anything . . . but now you have this in writing to say that my association with you has been one of the most pleasant experiences of my life.” Johnston to PCWRT, 6 December 1965; Johnston to PCWRT, May 6, 1965, both in Box 1, Johnston Papers.

²⁵ “Introduction May 15th, 1968,” Box 2, Johnston Papers.

²⁶ “One inmate told an early visitor, ‘I have been here 12 years and you are the first outsider who has shaken my hand.’” J. Ambler Johnston to E.W. Gregory, 15 December 1966, Box 2, Johnston Papers.

of the membership bodies' goal in life."²⁷ The Prison Round Table's guests often reported that their time with the group was just as affirming. One of their first speakers, who visited just after Labor Day 1962, followed up with a letter telling the group, "In my 60 odd years of public life I have made many talks, but I do not recall any one I enjoyed making . . . more."²⁸

The relationships begun in the Prison Civil War Round Table had more immediate and tangible outcomes, as well. Newsom and his fellow inmates more than once helped Johnston assemble and reproduce maps for his famous battlefield tours, and in 1967 they published a booklet reviewing the Chicago Round Table's tour (which Johnston attended) to the Arkansas and Missouri theaters. It was typed three times and stewarded carefully by those PCWRT members who worked in the print shop; the result was a publication unlike any other the original Civil War round table had seen. Johnston made sure the PCWRT was hailed as the author and perfecter of the document, and that they actually received all praise for it, writing in April 1968 to share excerpts of fourteen letters of appreciation the Chicago Round Table had received.²⁹

The assistance received by the inmate members of the PCWRT was more material, and often given in ways that acknowledge the class divide being bridged. Ambler Johnston helped the mother of one of the Prison Round Tablers, Bonnie Finnegan, make contact with her son in the Penitentiary. He loosed a bevy of letters assisting John McGann in his effort to be paroled from a

²⁷ "Prison Civil War Round Table News Letter," 1, no. 11 (January 1964).

²⁸ George Wesley Rogers to Newsom, 8 September 1962, PCWRT Records.

²⁹ Newsom to Johnston, 18 October 1967; Newsom to Johnston, 27 November 1967; Johnston to A.W. Finlayson and Members of the PCWRT, 5 April 1967, all in Box 2, Johnston Papers.

Maryland institution back to the Richmond area, putting him in touch with parole administrators in Virginia, helping locate work, and offering constant encouragement.³⁰ He also worked to smooth Charles Touché's parole and relocation to South Florida, sending a letter to the Miami Civil War Round Table that read in part, "I have come to see that some of these youngsters are capable of making good citizens if thrown with the right people and given the opportunity to associate with them." Johnston, admitting that his correspondent down I-95 did "not know me," hoped he shared the conviction that round tables were comprised by good citizens.³¹

In addition to the civic and historical organizations in which Johnston held sway, the National Park Service, the Richmond and Virginia Civil War Centennial Commissions, Richmond city government, the Office of Virginia's Attorney General, and Mary Washington College, Randolph-Macon College, and Virginia Tech, among other colleges and universities—all were well represented by those who visited and encouraged the Prison Civil War Round Table. There was but one exception to those willing to lend a hand. "Your request to have someone from this organization speak was referred to several local ladies," Mrs.

³⁰ Johnston to Rev. Walter B. Thomas, Captain Steven W. Weaver, David T. Mason, Esquire, 17 April 1972; Mason to Paul R. Sorenson, Maryland House of Correction, 25 April 1972; Johnston to N.W. Perdue, Executive Secretary, Virginia Probation and Parole Board, 2 May 1972; McGann to Johnston, 4 May 1972; Johnston to McGann, 10 May 1972; N.W. Perdue to McGann, 11 May 1972; Stuart H. Maule, Superintendent, Richmond National Battlefield Park, to McGann, 16 May 1972; McGann to Johnston, 27 June 1972; Johnston to McGann, 29 June 1972; all in Box 3, Johnston Papers.

³¹ J. Ambler Johnston to Bonnie Finnegan, 5 July 1967; J. Ambler Johnston to K. Foss, 19 July 1967; J. Ambler Johnston to Kay Foss, 14 October 1967; J. Ambler Johnston to Donald E. March, 27 September 1966, all in Box 2, Johnston Papers.

Kermit F. Crippen wrote on behalf of the United Daughters of the Confederacy. “It appears that none of them feel they are the person to do it.”³²

The PCWRT took only a few months to fulfill, even perfect, “round table life.” The materials were at hand, as was obvious when the *Civil War Round Table Digest* published an organizational guide with eleven questions designed to ascertain if the ingredients were at hand for a successful table. The Penitentiary could have immediately responded affirmatively to ten, and after a few years and a few hundred titles collected, their much improved library would have found them ideally situated by the *Digest’s* lights. Helping hands within and without the prison buoyed the group; they received what must have seemed, to less historically inclined inmates, vastly preferential treatment. Special mail privileges allowed them to exchange newsletters, the annual Christmas party came complete with catered fruitcake and coffee, prison officials occasionally postponed the members’ supper to allow an invited guest to finish his or her talk, visiting privileges were stretched to accommodate the group’s outside speakers, and guards provided a steady stream of war relics found in their off-duty hours.³³

And when the relics came into the prison through other means—as when, in the fall of 1962, dozens of truckloads of fill dirt were brought to the yard from the

³² Mrs. Kermit F. Crippen to PCWRT, 13 February 1973, PCWRT Records. The round table was not, however, without its female supporters; early in the group’s history, Margaret Maguire, of Brooklyn, New York, was a regular correspondent. Like many, she apprised the group of her travels and experiences, even reviewing the latest operas. Though she seems not to have accepted any of the group’s many invitations to visit the Penitentiary, Maguire sent copious letters and candy; “The fact that we are all strangers to you,” wrote Newsom on behalf of the group, “makes the kindness to us appreciated all the more.” Later in the 1960s, Mrs. Genevieve Barksdale visited the group in person. Maguire to Newsom, 14 November 1963, Newsom to Maguire, 30 March 1964, PCWRT Records.

³³ While not every weekly meeting included a guest, the PCWRT’s visitors came frequently enough to require a lenient reading of the provision that any Penitentiary visitor could come once during any two week period. “Virginia Division of Corrections: General Information for Families of Prisoners,” n.d., Box 1, Johnston Papers.

area of the Seven Pines campaign—members of the PCWRT were allowed to call their advocate N.E. Warriner, director of buildings and grounds for the Virginia Historical Society, and join him in scouring the area with a metal detector. (Warriner had spoken to the PCWRT on the art of searching for Civil War artifacts just two months earlier.³⁴)

It was with understatement, rather than exaggeration, that the group's founders suggested in 1965 that "This group operates exactly as do the outside round tables, with the exception of field excursions."³⁵ They likewise found escape into the study of the war as welcoming as did their counterparts on the outside. Stephen Ambrose had years earlier identified "escape" among the principles motivating Civil War round tables, and Richmonders of a Confederate bent had plenty from which to seek relief in the early 1960s. The escalation of the Civil Rights Movement and the Cold War could certainly be lost in commemorations of the war—as a prominent Richmond magazine put it, "In a world threatened by the ICBM, an age of brass cannon intrudes upon our thoughts."³⁶

But if their incarceration somewhat mitigated the effects of the Civil Rights movement and the pressures of the Cold War, their active correspondence

³⁴ Ibid., 2.

³⁵ Stewart Newsom, "A Brief History of the Prison Civil War Round Table," Mss4 P9387a1, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, Virginia. James Brunot, "War Relics Found at State Penitentiary," *Richmond News-Leader*, 19 November 1962. Warriner and members of the PCWRT found "a hand-forged hook, a wagon spike, a section of an old chain and several other small pieces of metal."

³⁶ "The Civil War in Virginia," special section, *The Commonwealth* (June 1961). Ambrose wrote that round tablers "find it relaxes them to leave the stress of the modern world for a time," and in a patent reference to Cold War tensions that depends on striking anachronism, "It is also comforting to know that our problems are not new, and that the old ones have been solved without blowing up the world." "The Civil War Round Tables," 261.

and study brought the tawdry, unfortunate first year of the Centennial home for the members of the Prison Civil War Round Table. Their letters and minutes, and the pride with which they reported their activities and accomplishments to those outside the Virginia Penitentiary, also suggest that they may have understood that their efforts were, in a way, a counterpoint to the problems of impermissibly segregated meetings, embarrassingly commercial sham battles, and abuses of the Civil War and its memory too numerous to name. The distinction between their work and the mess that was the Civil War Centennial outside the walls of Spring Street was even clearer when, almost unbelievably, the distraction of scandal found them quite literally where they lived. The Prison Civil War Round Table was offered an opportunity to reject the tomfoolery and impropriety that had so often infected the war's Centennial. It did not go wanting.

Robert W. Waitt, Jr., the executive director of the Richmond Centennial Commission to whom the inmates had written for help in establishing the Prison Civil War Round Table, was a public relations professional like his first counterpart at the National Commission, Karl Betts. He brought an even more colorful breed of ignominy on the Richmond group during the Centennial's twilight. Waitt was, according to the July 1963 *Richmond Times-Dispatch* editorial, "viewed askance by certain elements when he was first chosen as the committee's executive secretary."³⁷ That same summer, oddly enough, Waitt

³⁷ The *Richmond Times-Dispatch* editorialized on the United States Civil War Centennial Commission Medallion received by the Richmond Commission. The piece acknowledged that Waitt may have been held at arms' length because he had "two Yankee grandfathers" but that the

unveiled a round table talk, delivered at the PCWRT and other groups, alternately entitled “Sin and Civil War” and “A Kinsey Report on the Civil War.”³⁸ The Prison Round Table, who heard the talk under the former title, summarized it with consummate discretion. “Ladies and Gentlemen were not always as Webster’s described them,” the *News Letter* reported.³⁹

Waitt’s boss—J. Ambler Johnston—reacted somewhat more strongly. It would have been difficult to imagine a presentation more at odds with the civility, the seriousness, the scholarly approach that Johnston had cultivated not only among the Commission he chaired, but also among his adopted charges in the Virginia Penitentiary. He quickly wrote each group to whom Waitt had presented the material, expressing in no uncertain terms that the executive director had not spoken for the honorable city of Richmond or its Civil War Centennial Committee.⁴⁰ At least the matter was, to this point, relatively private; given Johnston’s keen attention to media coverage of the Centennial broadly and his group’s efforts within it, this consideration was key. But Waitt, unfortunately, had more to contribute along these lines.⁴¹

During the summer of 1964, Waitt was indicted for statutory rape, charges of which he was convicted in December. Johnston and his Commission

USCWCC Medallion proved that “He has performed well.” “The City Committee’s Accolade,” 10 July 1963.

³⁸ Waitt debuted the talk under the former title at the PCWRT in early May 1963. PCWRT Minutes, 26 April 1963, PCWRT Records.

³⁹ “Prison Civil War Round Table News Letter” 1, no. 8 (May / June 1963), p. 2, PCWRT Records.

⁴⁰ Johnston and C. Hobson Goddin (Vice Chair of the Richmond Civil War Centennial Committee) to W.N. Fitzgerald Jr., President, Milwaukee Civil War Round Table, 13 January 1964, Box 1, Johnston Papers.

⁴¹ “It’s strange how things are interesting to one person and not so to others,” Johnston wrote on April 2, 1965, in a letter that suggests his strict scrutiny of the Centennial’s coverage. “Richmond was evacuated 100 years ago today and in this morning’s *Times Dispatch*, you would have to read carefully to find any reference to it.” Johnston to Louis H. Manarin, Box 1, Johnston Papers.

could not cut ties with Waitt fast enough, upon learning of the allegations; clearly the executive director misjudged his chair when he suggested to Johnston “that you be given a leave of absence pending the outcome of certain warrants against you.” The “sorrow, disappointment and regret”⁴² that the Commission felt in July was compounded later in the year as the Richmond papers carried the story prominently, noting all along Waitt’s relationship with the city’s Centennial efforts.⁴³ Johnston, embarrassed almost beyond words, had realized the outcome he strove so hard to avoid. The memory of the Civil War had once again judged those working to honor it—this time, in the very capital of the Confederacy—and found them wanting. Waitt was assigned to the Virginia Penitentiary. And so the Prison Civil War Round Table’s first correspondent had become, alone among its outside supporters, fully eligible for membership in the group.

But it was not to be. The Prison Civil War Round Table, no doubt understanding the embarrassment endured by their fast friend Ambler Johnston, peremptorily blackballed Waitt—before his appeals were complete, before he was assigned to the Penitentiary, before, in all likelihood, Johnston had occasion to request any such action from them.⁴⁴ Stewart Newsom and his

⁴² Richmond Civil War Centennial Commission to Robert W. Waitt, Jr., 14 July 1964, Box 1, Johnston Papers.

⁴³“Man Given Five Years, Appeals Rape Sentence,” *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, 7 January 1965; Waitt appealed his conviction to the Virginia Supreme Court of Appeals, which upheld it. “Statutory Rape Conviction Upheld,” *Richmond News-Leader*, 13 June 1966; “Court Upholds Waitt Conviction,” *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, 14 June 1966.

⁴⁴ While it is impossible to know whether Johnston discouraged the PCWRT from welcoming Waitt, in my judgment any such request would have been unnecessary. It is beyond question that Johnston delighted in the decision; to a out-of-state correspondent, no doubt ignorant of the goings on in Richmond, Johnston described the PCWRT two weeks after Waitt’s conviction: “They are a very exclusive group within the prison and will not admit a new member easily. They look down

colleagues' empathy and allegiance lay not with the man whose mistakes had resulted with incarceration, but with the serious students of the war whose efforts he trampled. He was not Prison Civil War Round Table material; this group, when necessary, proved an able last line of defense for the Centennial's seriousness and decorum.⁴⁵

The Virginia Penitentiary was, during the late twentieth century, itself increasingly more confined by a city moving west—an unmistakable sign of past fighting to accommodate present. Beginning early in the Civil War's Centennial, the prison at Spring Street was also home to a group of inmates who studied at a series of fascinating crossroads.⁴⁶ The very earth beneath their feet, whether excavated to make way for a hotel they'd likely never visit, or harvested from a battlefield few of them would walk, bore the relics, the scars, of the Civil War to which they turned each Thursday afternoon. From this ground came the stories they sought and told from the Civil War. These stories competed with Civil Rights and the Cold War for the nation's attention and, in Virginia, even confronted the direst possible outcome of irrelevance. "Fear of a rapid and final disappearance," Pierre Nora has written, "combines with anxiety about the

on forgers, pickpockets, sex perverts, etc." Johnston to Arnold Alexander, 18 December 1964, Box 1, Johnston Papers.

⁴⁵ Johnston, deeply embarrassed and disappointed by Waitt's fall, made it known to the Penitentiary's administration that if Waitt came near the PCWRT, "he would cut every tie he had ever had to the Prison," recalled James I. Robertson, Jr. In discussion with the author, 22 October 2004.

⁴⁶ John Howard writes eloquently of the prison located in downtown Jackson, Mississippi and ultimately razed, with a new state Capitol built in its place. "Situated prominently in the urban landscape, it was not simply a symbol of order and power, authority and control. It was, as well, a memory device, a potent reminder. The prison in our midst acknowledged the deviance in our midst." "The Talk of the County: Revisiting Accusation, Murder, and Mississippi, 1895," in W. Fitzhugh Brundage, ed., *Where These Memories Grow: History, Memory, and Southern Identity* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 212.

meaning of the present and uncertainty about the future to give even the most humble testimony, the most modest vestige, the potential dignity of the memorable.”⁴⁷

The work of the Prison Civil War Round Table was in fact, on its face, “humble testimony”: slightly less than a score of enthusiasts gathering weekly to study and argue about the Civil War. But the unique circumstances under which they worked—the juncture of so many questions timely and timeless in Virginia and the broader South—imparts their work with the “dignity of the memorable.” With lives limited on nearly every front, they sought freedom through study and camaraderie. They were the Commonwealth’s most serious criminals, encouraged by her most accomplished citizens. They were students of a war, as one of their talks described it, fought by the South “with nothing” against “the Union who had everything”—but Virginia committed ten times as much to the Centennial as the federal government.⁴⁸ They were amateur historians encouraged, and held in much esteem, by scholars both close at hand and at some distance. Like others who studied the Civil War during the early 1960s, they escaped their own pressing circumstances, became members of what Benedict Anderson termed “imagined communities.” The stakes were somewhat higher for Stewart Newsom and his fellows “because,” as Anderson writes, “regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship.”⁴⁹

⁴⁷ “Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*,” *Representations* 26 (Spring 1989), 13.

⁴⁸ PCWRT Minutes, 28 May 1964, PCWRT Records.

⁴⁹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso, 1991 rev. ed., 7.

The story of Civil War Round Tables and the Civil War Centennial they helped fashion reminds that “the creation of influential historical narratives is as likely to take place outside of academia as within it.”⁵⁰ In fact, the Centennial was a kind of evolving contest between the professional historians and the “buffs”: Amateurs controlled the planning and opening month, in the persons of Karl Betts and Ulysses S. Grant III; Bell Wiley’s activism, resulting in his protégé James Robertson’s and Alan Nevins’ appointment in leading positions, left the initiative with professional historians. Their charge, however, expired along with that of the Civil War Centennial Commission. Professor McPherson’s point about the chasm between the cultures, the different languages spoken, once again prevailed.⁵¹ The chasm widened as Round Tables returned to cocktail parties and battlefield excursions, and academicians produced ever more arcane dissertations on the social and cultural aspects of the Civil War. One group with its academic robes, the other disinclined to part with Confederate uniforms.

The Prison Civil War Round Table, not just in its attire, offered a different approach, one with debts both to the asceticism of the academy and the enthusiasm of amateurs. Though not publishing scholars, they kept impressively current on the latest Civil War study. Though not immune to the lure of warfare, their interests were broad enough to include the social, the political, the cultural story. Though treasuring camaraderie and a learned esprit de corps, their attention to detail and accuracy was steadfast. Their work was interdependent with the historians whose scholarship they followed—more than other amateur

⁵⁰ W. Fitzhugh Brundage, “No Deed But Memory,” Introduction, *Where These Memories Grow*, 7.

⁵¹ James M. McPherson, “The Two Cultures and the Civil War,” 71-72.

groups, given their unique circumstances, they “depend[ed] on others to help them decide which experiences to forget and which to remember and what interpretation to place on an experience,” in the words of historian David Thelen. “People develop a shared identity by identifying, exploring and agreeing on memories.”⁵²

What the Prison Civil War Round Table shared with scholars far from Spring Street was diagnosed, appropriately, in very similar terms by two historians with vastly different orientations. Bruce Catton, former president of the D.C. Round Table and the preeminent popular historian of his generation, wrote eight books (*A Stillness at Appomattox* received the Pulitzer Prize in 1954) and served as founding editor of *American Heritage* in the late 1950s with an Oberlin B.A. his only real training. In an obituary of the most notable popular historian of the preceding generation, Douglas Southall Freeman, Catton noted that “Civil War history is the story of passionate men who felt things very deeply and were the most intense partisans. Some of that feeling has to rub off on the man who writes about them, if he is to do his job properly.”⁵³ Paul Ward, somewhat surprisingly perhaps, arrived at the same conclusion though traveling a very different journey toward it: Ph.D. from Harvard in 1940, five years service as Sarah Lawrence College’s president from 1960 to 1965, and nearly a decade as executive director of the American Historical Association.⁵⁴ He was, in short, an historian’s historian, well conditioned to take the academician’s side of a ..

⁵² “Memory and American History,” *The Journal of American History* 75, no. 4 (March 1989): 1122.

⁵³ “Douglas Southall Freeman, 1886-1953,” *Military Affairs* 17, no 2. (Summer 1953): 57.

⁵⁴ Wolfgang Saxon, “Paul L. Ward, 94, Historian and College President, Dies,” *New York Times* 18 November 2005.

question posed by a late-career essay, "Why History?" He suggested, as it happens, that "Historians have to be amateurs firstly in affection for their subject, and secondly in style of thought and language."⁵⁵

It would be an unmanageable leap to suggest that the Prison Civil War Round Table had a great impact on the direction of scholarship in the late twentieth century. Although highly motivated and handsomely supported, theirs was a small group with a limited reach. However, their group's undying attention to the least among us, the little people, the "plain," teaches us that their work should and does count, and is worthy of our mention. It is unmistakable, if coincidental, that historians have accepted the charge to write history from the ground up with ever more enthusiasm in the fifty years since the Prison Civil War Round Table was convened. Much more certain is that the Prison Civil War Round Table influenced the study and remembrance of the war in the city of Richmond. A review of the Centennial in the *Richmond News-Leader* recalled that "Richmond's committee has worked seriously to compile simple stories particularly of the 'little people' in Richmond during the War, and to relate them to the bigger happenings historians have dwelt upon."⁵⁶ The Prison Civil War Round Table beyond question encouraged this approach to history. Their own history, at some remove, reminds us of its value.

⁵⁵ Paul L. Ward, "Why History?," *The History Teacher* 7, no. 2 (February 1974), 184.

⁵⁶ 11 June 1965.

Conclusion: Monuments Great and Small

Throughout its history some members of the Prison Civil War Round Table, and some of those who supported it from without, conceived of the group as a kind of shadow society, something between a “special project” of the Richmond Round Table and an afterthought of the Department of Corrections’ educational arm. And the group did occasion, in even its most active, early history, attention leavened at times with sympathy, pity, or curiosity. Those closest to the group, like J. Ambler Johnston and George W. Todd, succeeded in looking past the group’s circumstance to the quality of their work and the breadth of their study. Johnston asked after an inmate’s history only once, when helping a PCWRT alumnus find work on the outside;¹ Todd, whose career with Virginia Corrections spanned four decades, read “five or ten” inmate files during all of those years. “I wanted to take them at face value,” he remembers. “That’s what happens in the real world.”²

To study the Prison Civil War Round Table is to take up the challenge implicit in Johnston’s and Todd’s commitment. Can we embrace the notion that, while studying the past under circumstances of place and time that no other group could replicate and none would choose, their work reflected effort, and perspective? Can we allow them to speak for themselves? These are complicated

¹ Johnston was at pains to qualify his query to John McGann. “What was your trouble, causing you to be in your present fix? You know I have never asked this question before to members of the Prison Civil War Round Table, but the question would obviously be put to me.” Johnston to McGann, 17 April 1972, Box 2, Johnston Papers.

² George W. Todd, in discussion with the author, 17 January 2005.

notions. “It is, to be sure,” as Charles Bright has written, “no easy matter to recapture prisoners for history.”³

To do so, to claim the Prison Civil War Round Table as a part of the story of the Civil War Centennial, Virginia history, and southern memory, is to say, again with Johnston, that “the unsung heroes interest me more.”⁴ And it is to unlock elements of their study and remembrance of the war that alternately cast light and shadow on broader efforts to remember the war. And it is to appreciate a relationship that crossed seemingly hard lines of class and incarceration.

Many among the members and supporters of the Prison Civil War Round Table shared friendships that began in their ancestors’ common battle experiences. Charles Houston, the *News-Leader* columnist who wrote often of the PCWRT, had a grandfather wounded at Spotsylvania; J.K. Featherston, the group’s first adviser, had a grandfather in the Confederate ranks; his predecessor, George W. Todd, did not—but he did have a grandfather named Stonewall.⁵

Throughout the Prison Round Table’s correspondence it’s clear that discovering such commonalities was an opening door. And the uniform worn by one’s ancestor didn’t always control. In November 1962 Stewart Newsom reported to Richard Hunt that “your Grandfather ... was mentioned several times in a book that I just read about General Sickles.” His own grandfather,

³ *Powers That Punish: Prison and Politics in the Era of the “Big House,” 1920-1955* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), 24.

⁴ ““And Then it was Over:” Aid given by Leaders of the Confederacy in Rebuilding of the South,” prepared remarks for the United Daughters of the Confederacy, 15 May 1968, Box 2, Johnston Papers.

⁵ George W. Todd, in discussion with the author, 17 January 2005.

Newsom continued, “followed Pickett across the field and over the stone wall; came back and lived to father six children and to be a cranky old man with a long beard.”⁶

Comparing their grandfathers’ footprints, ultimately discovering that they overlapped, became the source of a deep and immediate bond between Johnston and Newsom. The inmate naturally called on the chair of Richmond’s Centennial commission for assistance tracking his grandfather’s movements. After seeking, along with one other member of the PCWRT, a copy of the records of his grandfather’s service, a year and a half later Newsom sought help in completing the story. “I have found where they were in the Charles City Road–Fort Harrison sector when the troops were pulled out of the defenses of Richmond at the fall of Petersburg,” Newsom wrote. “There I lose them.” Johnston’s records were “almost nil” on such things, he reported, but did share the request with friend Louis Manarin, then working at the National Archives. He closed the letter to Newsom, “Incidentally, my father, too, was pulled out of the Fort Harrison sector at the same time.” Johnston’s and Newsom’s memory, what W. Fitzhugh Brundage has called their “genealogy of social identity,” had reached meaningful common ground. Fort Harrison had, years after their forebears fought near it, been the birth site of the Richmond Civil War Round Table.⁷

They were, from that Centennial-era exchange on, a pair locked in the common cause of the Prison Civil War Round Table. Johnston was a voluble

⁶ Stewart W. Newsom to Richard C.D. Hunt, 23 November 1962, PCWRT Records.

⁷ Robert W. Waitt, Jr. to J.F. Featherston, 7 June 1963, PCWRT Records; Stewart Newsom to J. Ambler Johnston, 30 January 1965; J.F. Featherston to Louis H. Manarin, 9 March 1965; J. Ambler Johnston to Stewart W. Newsom, 2 February 1965; all in Box 1, Johnston Papers. W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *The Southern Past*, 4.

widower who held court at his home in Richmond's fan, welcoming all but privileging those intending to take up his city's unique history. "Remember that at my home," he wrote one fellow war enthusiast from Kentucky, "are the four B's—Bourbon, Beef, Bed and Breakfast and you are most welcome."⁸ In hosting, and in everything, Johnston gave his all—not missing a Thanksgiving Day football game between Virginia Tech and V.M.I. for almost fifty years, and writing the Chicago Civil War Round Table to suggest that, just perhaps, it was actually he who held the record for attendance on their annual battlefield jaunts.⁹ Known widely as "Mr. Hokie" and "Uncle Ambler," he was likely pleased by the caption that accompanied one newspaper story published late in his life: it read, simply, "J. Ambler Johnston: Southern Gentleman."¹⁰

Stewart Newsom, on his "second" tour at the Virginia penitentiary when he started the Prison Civil War Round Table, grew up in the suburbs of Richmond. George Todd's recollections resonate with the picture of a man who, for almost a decade as the Prison Round Table's secretary, kept attendance logs and meeting minutes in a tight, clean cursive and typed correspondence carefully. "He was a small, frail, man who quietly went about doing his thing," Todd recalled years later. "He was a very serious individual." He was respected,

⁸ Johnston to Frank G. Rankin, 23 February 1967, Box 2, Johnston Papers.

⁹ Charles Houston, "No Turkey at Home," Sidelights, *Richmond News-Leader* 22 May 1969; "I have joined the group many, many times," Johnston wrote, and "would not be surprised to be in the lead . . . Would it be feasible to check my record?" Johnston to Margaret April, Civil War Round Table, 29 February 1972, Box 3, Johnston Papers. Newsom and his fellows were equally as zealous of their group's primacy. They often asked far-flung correspondents, "Do you know of any other prison that has a Civil War Round Table?" Newsom to Justin G. Turner, Civil War Centennial Commission of California, 21 March 1963, PCWRT Records.

¹⁰ Judith Roales, "Richmonder Has Tie to Battlefields," *Fredericksburg Free Lance-Star*, 4 May 1968, 3.

revered even, for his knowledge and judgment both by fellow inmates and friends of the group outside Spring Street.¹¹

Johnston visited the PCWRT twenty-three times from their first meeting in the spring of 1962 until the summer of 1966¹²—enough to begin referring to the group as his “nephews”—and Johnston and Newsom kept an active correspondence throughout the 1960s.¹³ It began with the Civil War, naturally, but quickly encompassed the common ground of advancing age, with Johnston commiserating with his friend on cataracts and other challenges. As Newsom’s health failed in the late 1960s, Johnston visited him often and followed his progress closely.¹⁴ One April day in 1970, Johnston received the following note from his secretary. “Mr. George Todd of Civil War Round Table of Penitentiary called to let you know that Mr. Newsom is not expected to live throughout the day.”¹⁵ He did not. Newsom died having spent 40 of his 62 years in the Virginia Penitentiary.

Stewart Newsom collected honors in death that only highlighted his uniquely compelling life. First, his headlined obituary in the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* described not his two murder convictions, but his accomplishment in study: “Civil War Expert Dies.” Next followed a memorial service held in the

¹¹ Newsom was convicted for murder and received a life sentence in 1932. He served 14 years and was then pardoned. Eight years later, he again was convicted for murder, once again receiving an additional life sentence. Newsom became eligible parole on June 16, 1967 and was interviewed each subsequent fall; no parole was approved. While Johnston did not ask his friends in the Penitentiary about their pasts, he did keep the news stories that outlined them. W.E. Boldin, Jr. to Newsom, 30 September 1969, PCWRT Records; *Richmond News Leader*, 2 June 1970, copy in Box 2, Johnston Papers.

¹² “Brief History of the Prison Civil War Round Table,” Appendix B, PCWRT Records.

¹³ Johnston to PCWRT, 13 November 1972, PCWRT Records.

¹⁴ Newsom to Johnston, 1 April 1966, Box 1, Johnston Papers.

¹⁵ Box 2, Johnston Papers.

Prison Chapel. The service was attended by equally robust contingents from the Prison Round Table's membership and its outside supporters, presided over by the penitentiary's African American chaplain, and held on the anniversary of Jefferson Davis's birthday. It was the first time Spring Street Prison stopped to mourn the passing of one of its residents, "a new and enlightened innovation between the Correctional System and those for whom it is administered."¹⁶ There would never be another like it.

The notoriety of the chapel quickly gave way to the anonymity of the morgue. Newsom died without assets or heirs, and so, according to Penitentiary practice, his body was conveyed to the Medical College of Virginia "for well known purposes."¹⁷ The leader who had cultivated the Prison Round Table for almost a decade, the historian featured in an obituary highlighting redemption instead of misdeeds, the friend celebrated in a unique memorial service—all gave way. Newsom was again, and finally, an anonymous ward of the state, #63646, once a teacher but now an exhibit.

"That disposition of Newsom's body was a shock to his friends," several later wrote, "both within the prison and outside who had associated with him in Round Table affairs."¹⁸ Their response was quick and decisive: Newsom was again redeemed. His comrades outside the prison walls conducted "a hurried solicitation," which, "coupled with the cooperation of the prison officials resulted in the body being retrieved from the Medical College and given a formal burial in

¹⁶ "The Prison Civil War Round Table, in memory of Stewart W. Newsom," 2 July 1970, PCWRT Records.

¹⁷ "Prison Civil War Round Table Burial Fund," 1 September 1971, PCWRT Records.

¹⁸ Ibid.

a public cemetery.” In the final first of a remarkable life, Newsom’s body was “redirected from its teaching destiny,” escaping the Medical College’s morgue exactly as it entered.¹⁹ Newsom was buried Maury Cemetery under a headstone paid for by his fellow members. It read, “Founder, PCWRT.”²⁰

The Prison Round Table’s members and advocates realized that the undignified and anonymous end that awaited poorer inmates was altogether at odds with their efforts during the last ten years. The close call quickly “gave birth to [the] proposal that a modest sum, a foundation, be set up to prevent any future similar occurrences.” The Prison Civil War Round Table Burial Fund, the latest and among the most interesting of the group’s innovations, was set forth in a most evocative document. Outlining nine operative proposals over two pages, it bore the same attention to detail exhibited in the group’s study and procedural tendencies. The document echoed the group’s pride in strict membership requirements, affirming that “burial expenses of a bona fide member of the Prison Civil War Round Table” would be the fund’s only use. It also reflected the group’s steadfast preservationist inclinations, specifying that burials covered under the fund would only occur “in a recognized public cemetery in which records are kept.” The document described how donations would be solicited “throughout Round Tables” and also outlined how PCWRT members would be permitted to give through their penitentiary accounts. Finally, and most powerfully, the document resulted from a 1 September 1971 meeting among five men, four of whom ultimately signed the documents, collaborating as

¹⁹ Charles Houston, “Unusual Funeral,” Sidelights, *Richmond News-Leader*, 5 June 1970.

²⁰ “For S.W. Newsom—Memorial Stone, Maury Cemetery,” n.d., PCWRTR Records. Nineteen PCWRT members donated a total of \$65.

equals. They included W.K. Cunningham, the state-level Director of Corrections; A.E. Slayton, the Penitentiary's Superintendent; Johnston, who signed as the group's "Sponsor"; and Thomas A. Abshire, the President of the Prison Round Table.

Abshire and his fellows were, as had so often been the case during the 1960s, in good company. Announcements and solicitations appeared throughout the spring of 1972 in round table newsletters across the country. The Chicago newsletter included a quote from Johnston calling the project "something close to our hearts"; the Decatur, Illinois, Round Table sent a collective donation of \$22.57 based on the appeal.²¹ The Richmond Round Table's mention of the Fund was coupled with a moving remembrance of Newsom and his memorial service. "In my lifetime," it read, "there never has been witnessed a deeper, more sincere demonstration of respect and regard than was shown on that occasion."²² Among the donors answering these calls and aiming to preserve the memory of Prison Round Table members were the brightest lights of Richmond: Virginius Dabney, editor of the Richmond *Times-Dispatch*; Eppa Hunton IV, namesake and doyen of the city's finest law firm; Archibald Robertson, Hunton's senior partner and counsel for Prince Edward County's defiant stand against school desegregation. Even still, it was Johnston who cared most. When the Burial Fund's balance

²¹ Civil War Round Table [Chicago] News Letter, Volume 32, Number 7, copy in Box 3, Johnston Papers; Amelia D. Mulrooney, Program Chairman, Decatur, Illinois Round Table, to Johnston, Box 3, Johnston Papers.

²² "Memo to Members," n.d., RCWRT Archives.

stood at \$274.21 in the summer of 1972, Johnston personally covered what remained of the \$500 goal.²³

Johnston's declining health and mobility made visits to Spring Street less common in the months after Newsom's death. And although he'd lost the chief correspondent with whom he commiserated on illnesses great and small, his correspondence with the Prison Round Table was robust still. His letters suggest that the group's continued success was a meaningful answer to his own mortality, becoming clearer all the time. Writing to the group in late 1973, when he had been confined to a wheelchair for more than a year, Johnston said "Nevertheless, I can and do rejoice in my thoughts of the Prison Civil War Round Table and I have the feeling it will continue."²⁴ A few months later, the Prison Civil War Round Table figured prominently in the remembrances that followed J. Ambler Johnston's own death, which came, as his daughter later remembered, while memories of the PCWRT were on his lips.²⁵

Richmond is a city where waters fall and monuments rise. A city that needs heroes, and creates them, holds them close. The day when Monument Avenue statutes of Lee and Jackson and Davis and Maury were saluted by city fathers is still within many Richmonders' memory. An effortless reverie—a thoughtless return to days of old. Such history never judges, never finds us wanting.

²³ Johnston to A.E. Slayton, 13 June 1972, Box 3, Johnston Papers.

²⁴ Johnston to PCWRT, 12 December 1973, Box 3, Johnston Papers.

²⁵ The Rev. Walter Thomas presided. Charles Houston, "Unusual Funeral," *Richmond News-Leader*, 5 June 1970. J. Spencer Gilmore to PCWRT, n.d., Box 2, Johnston Papers.

Others in Richmond, even during the Centennial of the Civil War, sought different histories, different monuments. J. Ambler Johnston had many from which to choose. Almost fifteen hundred public buildings bearing the mark of his architectural design. Dozens of Civil War markers, plotted through Johnston's Sunday drives with Douglas Southall Freeman, describe events on the battlefields that ring the city. But the monument that most pleased Johnston, and said the most about the bond he shared with his city and its history and its people of whatever walk of life, was more modest. It spoke of the life and legacy of another friend, one whose title he could not have, and was careful not to claim. Underneath it lay Stewart Newsom, Civil War Expert. "Founder, PCWRT."

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