

# 53rd Pennsylvania Volunteer Infantry Company C

"The Sentinel" May 2026

Newsletter of The James Creek Guards



"Clubs Are Trumps!"

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*I am always looking for newsletter content, so please forward your articles, book reviews, event summaries & photos, stories, etc.) to me for inclusion in a future edition of "The Sentinel". – Matthew Steger, editor*

## **SCHEDULE UPDATE**

At NR Camp of Instruction (COI) at Ft. McHenry the weekend of 4/18~4/19, ELF further discussed their 2026 schedule as it was still pending. I was alerted that the 3<sup>rd</sup> MD's Antietam LH event (of which several of us in the 53<sup>rd</sup> PA attended in 2025 to help support our ELF parades) is actually scheduled for 9/19, not 9/12 as listed on their website for 2026. This opens up the USAHEC event in Carlisle on 9/12~9/13 for us. The 53<sup>rd</sup> PA has historically attended USAHEC since it is a paid event, but it conflicted with Antietam the past few years. We need, at least, 7 to attend USAHEC so we can get paid. Since we're still in need of some items to complete assembling our basic kit, the money from USAHEC would be put to good use. Please add USAHEC to your schedules as we need participation in order to get paid.

## **BOOK REVIEW: CIVIL WAR RAILROADS**

By George B. Abdill

Reviewed by Mike Espenshade

Hardback; 1961, Bonanza Books, N.Y.; 192 pp text and pictures (>100); free from a much-older friend.

Like all wars, the Civil War was not all gunfire and panic. It was a conflict driven by supply and transport, with tremendous effort made by the men "behind the scenes". In Feb 1862, the United States Military Railroad (USMRR) was established to unite the various northern railroads (and any captured southern rail assets) into a single focus – win the war. Brilliant structural designers and experienced railroad leaders Herman Haupt and Daniel McCallum led the USMRR and its Construction Corps of heroic builders of track, bridge, roundhouse, warehouse, etc. Example, the rebuilding of the N. Carolina Cedar Creek bridge (530 ft long, 88' high) was completed in 72 hours. Rebuilt the Chattahoochee bridge near Atlanta in 1864 (780' long, 90' high) in 4 ½ days! Laid/rebuilt 45 miles of track in Tenn in 1863 in 4 days.

When the progressive leaders on both sides began to utilize the rails for transport of troops, supplies, wounded, etc. the key advantages became compelling. As a result, the rail lines became military targets of prime importance, and the tide of battle was often turned by the ability of the railroads to rush up reinforcements and keep up a steady flow of ammunition, rations, and forage.



In the Confederacy, the rail lines were of various gauges and dilapidated in condition. To aggravate matters, the CSA seized and controlled the southern railroads for military use over the States Rights theory of ownership that already existed – hampering their war effort. By wars end, the USMMR controlled 419 locomotives (including purchases and captures). The CSA had only a tiny fraction of this number.

Author George B. Abdill, an engineman himself, uses his railroad experience and parlay to translate these remarkable photos and stories into a stunningly relatable history lesson for us all. This impressive collection of images, many published for the first time, share the construction, destruction, re-construction, guerilla warfare, daring chases, incredible escapes from ambush, fantastic bridge-building results, incredible track-repair efforts, new innovations at every turn, sacrifices galore, etc.

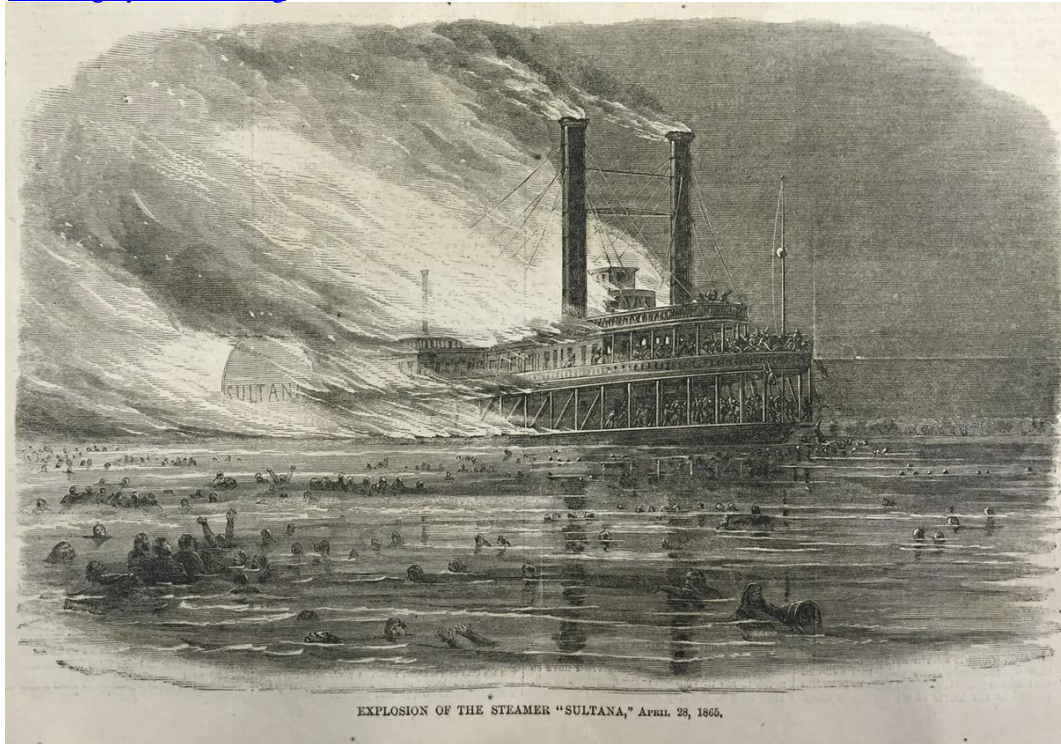
Have you heard of the “rail twister”? Invented by Haupt’s man, E. C. Smead, a pair of this handmade, handheld iron U-shaped tool could “tear up a track as quickly as you can say Jack Robinson and spoil the rails so nothing but a rolling mill can ever repair them!”. ... and they did. The USMRR men were civilians in civilian clothing, but shared the rigors and sleepless nights with the military. Built railcars to mount and fire huge mortars. Build floating car barges to transport 6 railroad cars across wide rivers or bays.

I immensely enjoyed this book. Every page revealed new education for this reader. The work involved to win the war, “just” from the rail perspective, is simply unbelievable. Great reference material = get this book.

## **THE TITANIC OF THE MISSISSIPPI**

Clay Hoffman, March 30, 2026

[blueandgrayeducation.org](http://blueandgrayeducation.org)



*Sultana on fire,  
illustrated in Harper's  
Bazaar | public domain*

On April 27, 1865, the side-wheel steamboat *Sultana* exploded and sank into the Mississippi River, claiming the lives of 1,164 souls, the majority being Union Army soldiers. The tragedy was overshadowed in the press by the events surrounding the end of the Civil War, including the killing of President Abraham Lincoln’s assassin, John Wilkes Booth, the previous day.

Under the command of Captain James Cass Mason, *Sultana* left St. Louis on April 13, 1865. When the vessel reached Vicksburg, Mississippi, Mason learned that thousands of newly freed Union soldiers—former prisoners of war from Confederate prisons at Cahaba, Alabama, and Andersonville, Georgia—were being held at a nearby parole camp, awaiting release to the northern states.

At the time, the U.S. government paid \$2.75 per enlisted man and \$8 per officer to carry these soldiers home. Needing money, Captain Mason agreed to take aboard an excessive number of prisoners, primarily from the states of Ohio, Michigan, Indiana, Kentucky, Tennessee, and West Virginia. The ship also carried approximately 70 cabin and deck passengers, a small amount of livestock, and a crew of 85.

When *Sultana* pulled away from Vicksburg on the night of April 24, she was dangerously overcrowded. On board were 1,950 paroled prisoners, 22 guards from the 58th Ohio Volunteer Infantry, plus fare-paying passengers and crew members—for a total of 2,127 people. Many of the paroled prisoners had been weakened by their incarceration and associated illnesses. They were packed into every available space, and the overload

was so severe that decks began to creak and had to be reinforced with heavy wooden beams.

*Sultana* spent two days traveling upriver, in the midst of one of the worst spring floods in the Mississippi's history. On April 26, she stopped at Helena, Arkansas, and later that evening arrived at Memphis, Tennessee, when the crew began unloading 20 tons of sugar from the hold. Near midnight, *Sultana* left Memphis, leaving behind about 200 men. She then went a short distance upriver to take on a new load of coal before continuing north.

At about 2 a.m. on April 27, *Sultana* was seven miles north of Memphis when her boilers exploded violently. The hot steam tore through the crowded decks above and destroyed the pilothouse. Without a pilot to steer the vessel, *Sultana* had become a drifting, burning hulk, her two smokestacks gone. The upper deck had collapsed onto the middle deck, killing and trapping hundreds.

Those who survived the initial explosion were forced to risk their lives in the icy spring runoff of the Mississippi or remain on the burning *Sultana*. Many died of drowning or hypothermia, while some survivors were plucked from the tops of semi-submerged trees along the Arkansas shore. Bodies of victims continued to be found downriver for months, and many others were never found. Most of *Sultana*'s officers, including Captain Mason, were killed in the disaster.



Many of the dead soldiers were initially buried at Fort Pickering Cemetery near Memphis. A year later, when the U.S. government established Memphis National Cemetery, the bodies were moved there.

Today, the [Sultana Disaster Museum](#), located in Marion, Arkansas, commemorates what was the worst maritime disaster in U.S. history.

*Captain James Cass Mason perished in the Sultana disaster | public domain*

## **NATIONAL REGIMENT CAMP OF INSTRUCTION SUMMARY**

On April 18~19<sup>th</sup>, the NR held its Camp Of Instruction at Ft. McHenry. Among the items covered were the bayonet exercise, various drill maneuvers with Scott Washburn, firing demonstration, guard mount, flag raising ceremonies, and more. The weather Sat. was warm and sunny with a breeze. Sunday was wet at times and cooler; the schedule was adjusted due to the rain for part of the morning. By early afternoon, the sun came out and our tents were once again dry. Attending from the 53<sup>rd</sup> PA were Steger, Benedict, Klee, Hinceman (Ben), and Hinceman (Oskar). We were also visited by in-active member Steve Dillon on Saturday morning. On Sunday afternoon, Sgts. Steger and Benedict were given the honor of raising the large "Civil War" flag. Also, Capt. Rick Betley of the 8<sup>th</sup> OH was awarded a special medal in honor of his decades of service to the NR. Photos are courtesy of Matt Steger (your author), Chip Smith (7<sup>th</sup> PA Res.), Ira Seidel (1<sup>st</sup> MD), and Tim Ertel (NPS/3<sup>rd</sup> MD).









## **UPCOMING EVENTS**

**15~17 May – 165 Bull Run Re-Enactment** at Brandy Station, VA. The NR will be portraying the 11th NY Fire Zouaves. Uniform is red, grey, or civilian checkered civilian shirt, preferred trousers are dark blue infantry, however, sky blue trousers are acceptable. Head gear will be fez, red kepi, or standard forage cap with a havelock (no bare forage caps!). Rifle and accoutrement are standard issue. If you have a 95<sup>th</sup> PA jacket, bring it as we may be able to wear them. Event registration and authenticity standards can be found here: <http://www.165th.org/>. Many of us in the 53<sup>rd</sup> PA have already registered.

**Registration goes up to \$45 on May 1st.** If you are interested in ordering a havelock, Rick Betley of the 8<sup>th</sup> OH is making them; contact Rick immediately if you are interested. His email is: [rbetley@yahoo.com](mailto:rbetley@yahoo.com). Also, no cartridge box slings.. your cartridge box must be on your waist belt.

**Note** - please do not get this May re-enactment event confused with the July Bull Run living history which is not an NR or 53<sup>rd</sup> event, although some from the NR are attending both. If you haven't done so, registered ASAP!

**25 May – Hummelstown Memorial Day Parade** – Meet at the Herbert Shaffner Memorial Park Pavilion on Park Side Avenue by 9:15AM. Frocks are preferred if you have one. Make sure that your brass and rifle are clean. Bring, at least, 3 rounds and 6 caps. We'll form up shortly thereafter at the parade's start point for weapons inspection. Parade begins promptly at 10AM with and includes a volley in the Square. The parade ends in the Hummelstown Cemetery where we will fire a volley as well. Afterwards, a quick lunch at the American Legion and then a debriefing at Corp. Espenshade's hut.

**14 June – Hummelstown America 250 Event.** Hummelstown Area Historical Society located at 20 North Rosanna St. 2:00 - 5:00 pm Sunday. All members are encouraged to attend this celebration - especially if guys wish to sleep overnight (the night before) in a very old (1762-1840) graveyard. **Note** – this is NOT same cemetery that we are in as part of the Memorial Day parade. This older cemetery contains 16 Rev War and 24 War of 1812 vets. If sleeping overnight, arrive after 5pm on Saturday June 13<sup>th</sup>. Stay tuned for more updates from Corp. Espenshade.

**8-9 August – Landis Valley.** Our annual Civil War Days event at Landis Valley but this year is extra special due to it being America's 250<sup>th</sup> birthday. The 53<sup>rd</sup> will be hosting other NR units so it is imperative that the 53<sup>rd</sup> have a good showing as far as attendance. Stay tuned for more updates as we get closer to August but please ensure that this event is on your calendar. 53<sup>rd</sup> MAX EFFORT!

**29-30 August** – Baker Mansion (Altoona) – Dr. Jared Frederick has invited the 53<sup>rd</sup> PA to attend a 2-day event at the Baker Mansion in Altoona. Part of Company C was originally recruited from that area and there are some original 53<sup>rd</sup> veterans buried in a nearby cemetery. Rusty and Jacob did a single-day event at the site last year. The 2026 event came to us after our annual meeting so it was not on our original schedule.

## **THE CIVIL WAR MERCHANT**

*(if you have something for sale or are looking for something, email me to include it in a future edition of "The Sentinel")*

### **For Sale –**

1. Kerry Williard is handling the sale of Dave Swigert items for Dave's wife. Marc and I assembled an inventory list with approximate values. Some items remain. The list is current as of April 2025. This is not the unit's quartermaster, but a separate list of items that Kerry is selling for the Swigart estate. Contact Kerry directly with all inquiries: [shamokin71@aol.com](mailto:shamokin71@aol.com) (see the updated list below)

Quantity	Item Description	Detailed Description	Price
<b>Uniform Clothing</b>			
1	Trouser - Steel Blue each with suspendors	34 min waist/27" inseam-avg. condx and a little dirt w/ braces no watch pck	\$25.00
1	Dk Blue Vest Size 42	3 pockets - light wear	\$20.00
1	Colored Pattern Shirt	blue plaid with white china buttons - sun faded - good condx	\$10.00
1	White muslin Shirt	19" at shoulder 14" neck - very short in body length	\$5.00
1	White muslin Shirt	20" at shoulder 16" neck - very short in body length - cuffs are stained	\$5.00
1	Underpants - Night Pants - White	36" waist - knee stains - 25" inseam white muslin - rear repair	\$3.00
1	Lt Brown Scarf - Acrylic - Modern		\$1.00
1	Havelock - White - VG condx		\$2.00
1 pairs	Grey Wool Socks -Modern		\$2.00/pr
2	Hats - Union & Confederate for children		\$1.00
<b>Accoutrements</b>			
1	Scabbord -Late war 7 Rivet		\$15.00
1	Gum Blanket	some cracking with oversized grommets	\$20.00
1	Grey Smooth Face Canteen - Leather Sling Satinette Cover w/ Corded Stopper		\$20.00
1	Haversack - Tarred Black - Brittle Strap w/opwn seam		\$5.00
1	Haversack - Tarred Black w/Liner- Paint peeling Holes @ Strap Connection		\$10.00
1	Grey Smooth Face Canteen - Leather Sling Satinette Cover w/ Corded Stopper		\$20.00
<b>Misc Items</b>			
1 can	sno-seal (half full)		\$1.00
1	Wood Mirror - Haversack filler	sliding cover	\$3.00
1	Wood Comb - Haversack filler		\$1.00
1	Wooden button board		\$1.00
2	Coin Purses - Made from Tic Material		\$1.00/ea
1	Bag with Coffee	brown coffee	\$1.00/ea
2	Soap Bar		\$1.00/ea
1	box rifle cleaning kit	pads, steel wool, rags, etc	\$5.00
1 Pair	shoe tree		\$3.00
1	Green Army Duffle Bag		\$3.00
1	drawers for use as patches		\$1.00

## **2026 CALENDAR OF EVENTS**

7 January – Annual Party/Banquet – Dobbin House (Gettysburg)  
21~22 February – NR School of Instruction – Gettysburg – 53rd Max Effort  
14 March – Cartridge Rolling Party – Kleinfeltersville  
17~19 April – NR Camp of Instruction (Ft. McHenry) – 53rd Max Effort  
15~17 May – Bull Run Re-enactment – Brandy Station (NR)  
25 May – Hummelstown Memorial Day Parade  
14 June – Hummelstown – America 250th Living History  
8~9 August – Landis Valley “America 250 Celebration: Military Days” – 53rd Max Effort  
29~30 Aug. – Altoona (Baker Mansion)  
12~13 Sept. – USAHEC (Carlisle – paid event)  
19 Sept. – 3<sup>rd</sup> MD Living History at Antietam  
3~4 October – Seminary Ridge Museum Living History – 53rd Max Effort  
7~11 October – Bulltown, WV. Organized by the 116<sup>th</sup> PA (NR)  
17~18 October – Cedar Creek Re-enactment  
14 November – NR Annual Meeting and Remembrance Day Parade (NR)  
TBD December – 53<sup>rd</sup> PVI Annual Meeting



For updated event info and other news, please check out the Facebook pages of the 53<sup>rd</sup> PVI and/or the National Regiment (links below) and check your email on a regular basis.

### **53rd PVI Contacts**

President: Alec Bohnenblust ([pntbl499@gmail.com](mailto:pntbl499@gmail.com))  
Vice President: Jacob Dicks ([jdwarrior@yahoo.com](mailto:jdwarrior@yahoo.com))  
Treasurer/Secretary: Matthew Steger ([n3ntj@outlook.com](mailto:n3ntj@outlook.com))  
Newsletter Editor: Matthew Steger ([n3ntj@outlook.com](mailto:n3ntj@outlook.com))  
Webmasters: Matthew Steger ([n3ntj@outlook.com](mailto:n3ntj@outlook.com)) and Steve Dillon ([steve@gofoxpro.com](mailto:steve@gofoxpro.com))  
53<sup>rd</sup> PVI Website: <https://www.53rdpvi.org>  
2026 Field Officers: Sergeants: Matthew Steger (1<sup>st</sup> Sgt.) & Marc Benedict  
Corporals: Mike Espenshade & Mike Brumbaugh  
53rd PVI Private Facebook Page: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/53rdPVI>  
53<sup>rd</sup> PVI Public Facebook Page: <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=61586734625435>  
National Regiment Website: <https://www.thenationalregiment.com>  
National Regiment Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/842904089142263>

