

53rd Pennsylvania Volunteer Infantry

Company C

"The Sentinel" May 2025

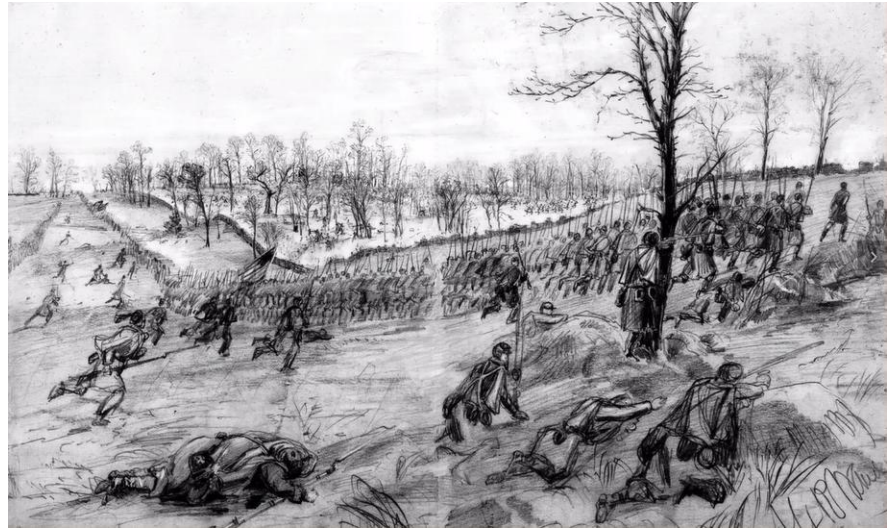
Newsletter of The James Creek Guards



"Clubs Are Trumps!"

This Month:

1. The Devil's Punchbowl
2. Robeson Living History
3. Book Review – The Baldwin Locomotive Works 1831-1915
4. The Consequences of Civil War Combat
5. Sailor's Creek Event Summary
6. Flag-In Event at Lancaster Cemetery
7. Ft. McHenry Event Summary – ELF Drill
8. The Civil War Merchant
9. 2025 Calendar of Events
10. 53rd PVI Contact Info



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

THE DEVIL'S PUNCHBOWL

John M. Taylor and Norman Dasinger, Jr., March 31, 2025, blueandgrayeducation.org



Devil's Punchbowl produces some of Mississippi's juiciest peaches, but locals refuse to eat them, based on its harrowing history. | public domain

Following the Union Army's conquest of the Mississippi River Valley in 1863, thousands of formerly enslaved people and destitute white refugees fled plantations and farms in a desperate bid for survival. Many sought refuge in Natchez, Mississippi, hoping the Union occupiers would offer protection and security. Some estimates suggest the population of Natchez surged from 10,000 to as many as 120,000 during this time, overwhelming the city's limited resources and making survival a daily struggle—especially for the newly freed.

A *Natchez Democrat* article dated June 17, 2022, described the situation: "As runaway slaves flocked to where the

Union army was, they were seeking freedom behind Union lines. That meant thousands of former slaves flocked to Vicksburg, Natchez, Port Hudson, all along the Mississippi. The Union army had no policy at the time for how to deal with the thousands of formerly enslaved people who were arriving in droves. Natchez had a huge

influx of self-emancipated enslaved persons, and the Union was not equipped to handle that, so they established refugee camps.”

Branded as “contrabands” (a term implying they were illegally held property), many of these individuals were confined to what is now known as the Devil’s Punchbowl—a deep, wooded ravine shaped like a natural bowl. By 1864, all “idle Negroes” were ordered into this camp. A decree published in the *Weekly National Intelligencer* on April 28, 1864, read:

“It is hereby ordered that after the 1st Day of April, 1864, no contraband shall be allowed to remain in the city of Natchez, who is not employed by some responsible White person. ... All contrabands in the city in contravention of this order ... will be removed to the contraband encampment.”



A stereoscope photograph of the Devil's Punchbowl in Natchez, Mississippi, circa 1900 | (Norman C. Henry/New York Public Library Digital Collections)

A WJTV News Channel 12 report from Jackson, Mississippi, described the Devil’s Punchbowl as “a place where, during the Civil War, authorities forced tens of thousands of freed slaves to live in concentration camps. However, some historians claim that the term “concentration camp” may not be entirely accurate. In a June 17, 2023, journalist Marquise Francis noted, “As squalid as the conditions were for refugees in Natchez, this was not a concentration camp (with all that is implied by that term).”

According to the late Don Estes, former director of Natchez City Cemetery—and a source the author personally knew—“The camp was at the bottom of a hollow pit with trees on the bluffs above. ... Over 20,000 freed slaves were killed in one year.” Though the true death toll remains uncertain, historian Ron Davis, professor emeritus at California State University, wrote in *The Black Experience in Natchez* that “The main refugee camp in Natchez contained as many as 4,000 refugees in the summer of 1863. ... In the fall of 1863, 2,000 had already perished.”

The *Natchez Democrat* added, “The people in the contraband camps suffered disease because of the overcrowding and poor sanitation, as well as from drinking Mississippi River water ... they had mass deaths—daily deaths.”

Although some Union soldiers expressed concern for the refugees, many did not. Researcher Paula Westbrook told WJTV, “The Union Army did not allow them to remove the bodies from the camp. They just gave ’em shovels and said bury ’em where they drop.”

To this day, the Devil’s Punchbowl remains a haunting symbol of this chapter in history. The ravine is known for producing some of the region’s most beautiful peaches—yet locals refuse to eat them, based on the sordid history of the area and recognition that the original “fertilizer” was from the deterioration of human flesh.

As past stories are retold and recent research emerges, The *Natchez Democrat* aptly observed: “The myth of the Devil’s Punchbowl mixes fact and fiction.”

ROBESONIA LIVING HISTORY -

Our living history in Robesonia is coming up on this Saturday, May 3rd. We need to have, at least, a half dozen rifles in the ranks this year. The event runs 10am - 4pm. Set-up by 9:30. In past years, they've given us vouchers for the food trucks but that is not a guarantee so bring some light food to get you through the day. We will do, at least, one firing demo but might be asked for a second so bring, at least, 15 rounds. Shelters are optional. If you haven't done so already, let Eric know ASAP if you are attending. Address is 26 W. Freeman Street, Robesonia, PA 19551

PATRIOTIC ORDER SONS OF AMERICA, BERNVILLE CAMP #113

PATRIOTS DAY

Old Time Music Festival



DEDICATED THIS YEAR
IN LOVING MEMORY
OF OUR BROTHER
ROBERT R SHARTLE
1932-2025

FREE EVENT
SAT. MAY 3, 2025
10am - 4pm
ROBESONIA FURNACE
26 W Freeman St., Robesonia, PA 19551



LIVE MUSIC WITH

- The Blue Marsh Ramblers
- New Horizon Jazz Band
- Conrad Weiser High School Jazz Band
- The Tulpehocken Choir

BRING YOUR LAWN CHAIRS

- ★ **Civil War Living History Reenactment**
- WITH VINTAGE RIFLE FIRING DEMONSTRATION
- ★ **Food Trucks**
- ★ **Crafts Tables**
- ★ **Cannon Firing**
- EVERY HOUR ON THE HOUR
- ★ **Tractor Rides**
- AND OTHER ACTIVITIES FOR THE KIDS
- ★ **Guest Speakers**
- ★ **History of the American Flag Presentation**
- ★ **Flag Retirement: 3 pm**
- BRING YOUR OLD FLAGS FOR PROPER RETIREMENT
- ★ **Gun Raffle Drawing: 4 pm**

Guided Tours of the Historic Paymaster's House



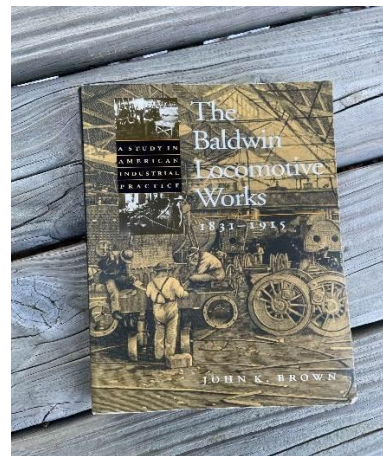
BOOK REVIEW: THE BALDWIN LOCOMOTIVE WORKS 1831-1915

Author – John K. Brown

Reviewed by Mike Espenshade

Paperback; 1995; Johns Hopkins University Press; 241 pp text; 102 pictures; 16 tables and charts; 58 pp notes, 20 pp bibliography and index. \$25.00 at Altoona Railroader's Memorial Museum bookstore.

Matthias Baldwin, an innovative and courageous Christian businessman, in 1831 ushered into the American economy important improvements (such as the flexible beam and “forward truck wheels”) upon the imported English locomotives. By 1847 he was aggressively offering 15 models of engines for the surging main line, heavy industry, coal mining, lumbering, and export markets. Surviving the 1837 panic and strong competition of the 1850's, Baldwin set new standards for labor relations, piecework/skill-set management practices, marketing techniques, and production innovations in a heavily specialized business and fluctuating economy. By 1861 79% of Baldwin's production went to the southern US states who were about to leave the Union - and the market.



Ok, Mike, what does this book have to do with the Civil War and why should we care? For the one or two of you who actually read my book reviews, here is an answer.

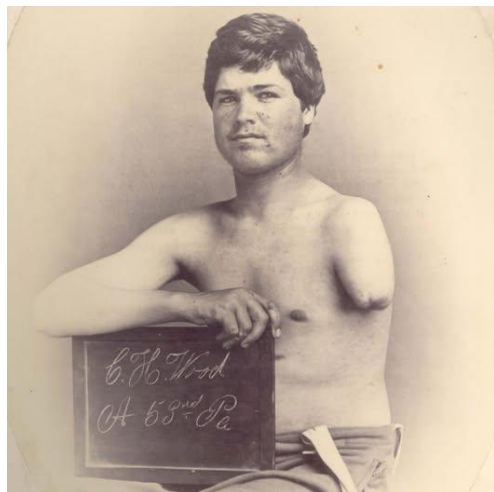
As you are aware, the importance of railroads to execute/support the efforts of both armies was essential. This became immediately clear during the First Bull Run campaign in July 1861 as Confederate reinforcements arrived by rail to save the battle for the South. Woe be to The South for not being able to produce a single locomotive and, by early 1863, had over 25% of their engines out of service due to overuse or lacking spare parts. Because of the southern states' individualistic protectionist practices, there was 5 different gauges of railroad track across the south, forcing time consuming off-loading and transfer to another track of supplies/troops in most of their rail line cities. By the end of 1863, over 1200 miles of southern track was out of service due to lack of rails/cross-ties. Meanwhile, the North was ADDING thousands of miles of track and locomotives during the war. Example: Pennsylvania's **Erie-Sunbury RailRoad**, through mountainous country, was completed in 1864.

The Baldwin Locomotive Works of Philadelphia, largest maker of heavy machinery in Gilded Age America, achieved its dominance over the numerous competitors during the Civil War years. The **Pennsylvania RailRoad** alone purchased over 100 engines from Baldwin during the war (Baldwin had a secret agreement with PRR to sell them all the locomotives they needed for \$250 each less than competitors). Other locomotive makers suffered [Norris and Hinkley, 2nd and 4th largest of 10 makers in 1860, went out of business]. Baldwin produced 456 locomotives during the war years. Matthias Baldwin was also a founder and key contributor to the US Sanitary Commission during the War.

This is an engaging portrait of the world's preeminent builder of locomotives and shows a new side to the specialized industrial enterprise in America. By 1902, Baldwin was making 1,533 engines a year - and made 3,580 in 1918 (10 a day). Brown's research is exhaustive and is presented in an insightful account of the machinery, tools, operations, management and marketing efforts. The lavish illustrations and photographs are to be commended.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF CIVIL WAR COMBAT

Submitted by Marc Benedict



This photograph from the collection of the National Museum of Health and Medicine shows Private Charles H. Wood of the 53rd Pennsylvania displaying his amputated left arm.

Private Wood was shot in the arm during combat at Petersburg, Virginia on March 31, 1865. His arm was amputated in a field hospital near the front lines.

The history of the case is preserved by the Museum:

"Charles H. Wood. Hospital Number 20.951. Chas. H. Wood, Private, Co. D, 53rd Pa. Vols., aged 19, was admitted to Harewood U.S.A. Gen'l Hospital, April 5, 1865, suffering from gun shot wound of left arm, extent of injury unknown. Wounded, March 31st, 1865, at the battle of Petersburg, Va. The left arm was amputated on the field, March 31st, 1865, by a circular incision. On admission, the stump was in good condition. Constitutional state of patient was also good. Result favorable. Harewood U.S.A. General Hospital, R.B. Bontecou, Surgeon U.S. Vols., In charge."

Wood was 19-years-old when he was wounded. He had enlisted in the 53rd Pennsylvania in Coudersport, Potter County in March 1864.

SAILOR'S CREEK EVENT SUMMARY

160th Sailors Creek, Va. - Reenactment – April 4-6 2025

Corporals Brumbaugh and Espenshade and Private Thomas finally left the road at the event site around 4:45 pm on Friday, April 4th and found our camp site by 5:30. Within a short time, we had a comfortable shebang of three shelter-halves tied to a large pin oak tree – enough sleeping space for four men. Privates Fedorchak (in the shebang) and Orris (his own tent) joined us for a few minutes in camp along the pleasant tree line adjoining a deep woods. Grand Guard details were released onto the woods/picket line and contact with the enemy soon occurred. Defensive works preparation and picket action, some offensive, was experienced by the brave picket line for several hours in the dark. A very happy time was spent in camp that night upon return of the men from Guard.

The morning brought battalion formation and then company drill. After a nice rest, our 3rd (ELF) Company (19 rifles) was formed with the 100-rifle battalion on a road march in order to fully enjoy the very warm weather and high humidity. Rebel bushwackers attacked the column after only ½ mile and melted safely across the fields unharmed – as we were not permitted to respond. We formed into battle line with skirmishers deployed, stayed still, and sweated. We then marched along further trying to find the enemy through pasture and woods while our cavalry could be heard exchanging shots. We marched another mile or so for a rest in the woods behind the Hillsman House/Hill. Word was that the rebels were in force and we were to push them beyond the hill and down across the Sailor's Creek Bridge. We handsomely swept the hill and fields in brigade front, firing multiple volleys at a mostly hard-to-see enemy under a light fire from several dozen Confederates who disappeared into the woods.

Our battalion rested and lunched on the sunny side of the creek, the mid-80 degrees generously producing more moisture into our woolen clothing. We formed up again, crossed the creek on a bridge, and slid into a wooded path awaiting orders to assault the Confederate Army. The orders finally came as we rushed out into the open field, firing at rebels on the hill in right front of us as each company fronted to the left and to the right of the road. We could see another Federal force to our forward left was retreating after suffering heavy casualties. Our officers deployed our companies to begin to encircle the stagnant (and grossly outnumbered) rebels of whom wore heavy artillery and some naval uniforms. These few rebels who were stuck on the middle-side of the hill and were already surrendering after we had fired but a couple of rounds.



Now, having surrounded the 25 or so enemy, orders were given to both sides regarding conduct and weapon positions. A brief rest was given before the prisoners, surrounded by an alert guard, marched the long road back up to the Hillsman House in a column of twos. The prisoners were put into a contained area with guard as both armies then rested to finish the day. Our battalion made camp nearby in an open, straw stubbed field that became high-wind-swept starting in late afternoon.

That Saturday night, much skill was presented by the reenactors involved in the Hillsman House "Hospital" along with period-civilian reenactors and some park staff actors. Many civilian tourists/videographers were impressed and amazed as they came through the many displays of injury, shock, anguish, and pain experienced by the wounded.

Sunday's participation of our battalion in the ceremony by the Park Staff was well-attended. No fighting on Sunday. The Federal camp broke and was on the road by 9:30am.

Event participants, from my limited

viewpoint, numbered about 220 Federal, 50 Confederate, and maybe 15 period-civilians. No artillery.

I have to say, the Virginia Historical Park Service effort for commemorating the 160th anniversary of the important Battle of Sailor's Creek had well-provisioned signage, water and potties. However, and let the judgements lay where they may ... the battle scenarios were hardly worth the time of either spectator or participant. The Federal Infantry marched well over 6 miles on Saturday leading to the most-of- heard comment heard, "Well, that is the first good sweat this year."

Submitted by Corporal Michael Espenshade



For a lot more event photos, please see the event page at the 53rd's website: <https://www.53rdpvi.org/sailors-creek-160-2025/>

FLAG-IN EVENT AT LANCASTER CEMETERY

On Saturday 17 May 2025, Lancaster Cemetery will have their flag-in event for volunteers to install flags at veterans graves. Meet at 9AM inside the gate at the cemetery's SW corner. Most of the graves that we've decorated in prior years have been Civil War, WW1, and WW2 although there are also Rev War, SpanAm War, and other periods of veterans grave in the cemetery. We are normally done around 11:30AM or so and may go somewhere local for lunch afterwards. Please let me know ASAP if you plan on participating. Street clothes, comfortable shoes, etc. If you have a 4-wheeled wagon, bring it as it makes the job a little easier.

FORT MCHENRY DRILL SUMMARY

On 26~27 April, the 53rd participated in the ELF drill (of which the 53rd PVI is a member) at Ft. McHenry. Attending were Sgt. Steger, Captain Dicks (surgeon), and Private Hinceman. We participated in the flag raising (Sat. and Sunday) and flag-lowering (Sunday) ceremonies as well as did bayonet drill and skirmish drill each day. Guard mount was also done for a short time before a thunderstorm passed through the area and drenched the site for about 10 minutes. Our meals were prepared by Dan Seibert of the 1st MD which were excellent all weekend. We also slept in the barracks overnight. Besides the 53rd, members of the 1st MD, 3rd MD, 7th PA Reserves, 8th OH, and Sykes Regulars attended.







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.) I have a C&D Jarnagin size 46 federal enlisted frock coat for sale. Still in great condition. Email me with any questions/inquiries: n3ntj@outlook.com

(2.) 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 27 March 2025. Contact Kerry directly with any and all inquiries: shamokin71@aol.com (see the updated list below)

Quantity	Item Description	Detailed Description	Price
Uniform Clothing			
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
Accoutrements			
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
Misc Items			
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

2025 CALENDAR OF EVENTS

- 18 Jan. - Holiday Party - Dobbin House, Gettysburg
- 1 Feb. - Winter Drill - Landis Valley **[53rd MAX EFFORT]**
- 15 Feb. - Cartridge Rolling Party **[53rd MAX EFFORT]**
- 22~23 Feb. - NR School of Instruction – Gettysburg
- 14~16 March - 160th Bentonville (NC)
- 4~6 April - 160th Sailor's Creek (VA) *
- 26~27 April - Ft. McHenry Drill
- 3 May - POSA Living History - Robeson, PA
- 17 May - Lancaster Cemetery Flag-in Event
- 26 May - Hummelstown Memorial Day Parade **[53rd MAX EFFORT]**
- 7~8 June – Manassas (ELF Event) **[NEW DATE!]**
- 19~20 July - Landis Valley **[53rd MAX EFFORT]**
- 9~10 August - Cedar Mountain *
- 13 Sept. - Antietam Living History **[53rd MAX EFFORT]**
- 18~19 Oct. - 161st Cedar Creek - Middletown, VA
- 15 Nov. - Remembrance Day - NR Annual Meeting and Parade *



*NR max effort events

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

53rd PVI Contacts

President: Eric Ford (reenactor53@gmail.com)

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Webmasters: Steve Dillon (steve@gofoxpro.com) and Matthew Steger (n3ntj@outlook.com)

53rd PVI Website: <http://www.53rdpvi.org>

2024 Field Officers - Sergeants: Matthew Steger (1st Sgt.) & Marc Benedict

Corporals: Mike Espenshade & Michael Brumbaugh

53rd PVI Facebook Page: <http://www.facebook.com/groups/53rdPVI>

National Regiment Phone line: 800-777-1861 (code 61)

National Regiment Website: <https://www.thenationalregiment.com>

National Regiment Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/842904089142263>

