

# The Bugle



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*“The field upon which we now stand will be known as classic ground, for here has been the great central point of the organization of our military forces. When my administration of public affairs will have been forgotten and the good and evil will be only known to the investigation of the antiquarian, Camp Curtin, with its memories and associations, will be immortal.”*

- Governor Andrew Curtin, 1865

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**The Bugle • Winter 2012, Volume 22, Number 4**

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## Harold Holzer Speaking at State Museum

The Pennsylvania State Museum will present “An Evening with Harold Holzer,” author of *Emancipating Lincoln: The Proclamation in Text, Context and Memory* at 7:15PM on Friday, January 11, 2013. The event will include of "Emancipation: Lincoln and His Proclamation," an exhibit featuring the Union League's copy of the Emancipation Proclamation.



Holzer is one of the country's leading authorities on Abraham Lincoln and the political culture of the Civil War era. A prolific writer and lecturer, and frequent guest on television, Holzer serves as chairman of The Lincoln Bicentennial Foundation, successor organization to the U. S. Abraham Lincoln Bicentennial Commission, to which he was appointed by President Clinton in 2000, and co-chaired from 2001–2010. President Bush, in turn, awarded Holzer the National Humanities Medal in 2008. He is serving currently as a Hertog Fellow at The New-York Historical Society.

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**Cover:** “Christmas Boxes in Camp - 1861” from *Harper’s Weekly* cover page, January 4, 1862. During the Civil War the folks at home often sent boxes to their “boys” in the field. It was most common during the winter months when the soldiers were in fixed camps and could use “luxury” items, such as extra shirts and socks, canned goods, dried fruit, nuts, books, candles, stationery, and cookies. Soldiers often wrote home with their “want list,” somewhat like writing to Santa. This illustration shows Union soldiers gleefully opening a box from home at Christmas, their first away from home. Once the spring campaigning season came, however, most of these items would be left behind and a soldier would take on the march with him only the fond memory of a loved one’s thoughtfulness.

## **Camp Curtin Historical Society and Civil War Round Table**

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# Breechloaders: The Cutting Edge of Technology



During the Civil War, the typical infantry weapon was a rifle-musket. They were single shot muzzleloaders that were about chin high on the average soldier. Over three million such weapons were used by the North and South during the Civil War.

There were, however, great technological advances in firearms just before and during the Civil War. For years, inventors had tried to develop a firearm that could be loaded at the breech. Such a weapon would allow for a faster rate of fire and would not require the soldier to remain standing during the loading process. The nineteenth century industrial revolution that brought mass production, improvements in metallurgy, and machine tools that could produce products with close tolerances eventually led to the production of successful breechloaders and even repeaters for the Civil War.

There was opposition in the Army to the introduction of breechloaders for several reasons. First, they were new technology that had not yet been perfected and thus, like new technology today, were subject to breakage and malfunction. Second, they were expensive, often three or more times the cost of the reliable and simple rifle-musket. Third, the prevailing military thought of the time was that the increased rate of fire would encourage soldiers to waste ammunition. While this final objection may seem strange, it should be remembered that resupplying soldiers in the field, especially during a battle, was a major problem.

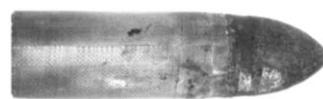
During the war, the federal government purchased about 400,000 breechloaders from twenty-one different manufacturers. About 93% percent were

in carbine length (waist high on the average soldier) and 7% in rifle length (mid-chest high). The carbines, such as the Sharps shown above, were carried by cavalymen and could be quickly loaded and fired from horseback. The rifles were usually issued to infantry but some cavalry units did receive rifles. The most common breechloaders were Sharps, Burnside, Spencer and Smith.

Christopher Sharps obtained his first patent for a breechloading rifle in 1848 and his first government contract in 1852. By the time of the Civil War, Sharps had supplied over 7,000 carbines to the army and during the Civil War sold over 80,000 carbines and over 9,000 rifles to the federal government.



The Sharps Model 1859 (with patchbox in the stock) and slightly improved Model 1863 (without patchbox) carbines were 39 inches long and weighed 7 pounds 12 ounces. Sharps' carbines were single shot breechloaders that fired a .52



caliber bullet, with its gunpowder charge attached by a paper or linen wrapped cartridge that burned off when ignited by a percussion cap. The top level of its long range sight was 800 yards. The pre-war

reputation of the Sharps so impressed the Confederates that they produced over 5,000 copies. After the war, Sharps made excellent hunting and target rifles but without government contracts, the company folded in 1881.

Ambrose Burnside was a lieutenant in the US Army when he developed his idea for a breechloading carbine in the early 1850s. He resigned his commission in 1855 to go into the gunmaking business but, despite a small government contract, was forced by debts to sell his patents. Burnside reentered the army and eventually rose to the rank of major general, commanding the Army of the Potomac at the Battle of Fredericksburg. The new owners of the Burnside patents, still using his name for the gun, were able to obtain government contracts for over 55,000 carbines during the war.



This carbine was also a single shot breechloader. It fired a .54 caliber bullet with a brass gunpowder case that was dropped into the breech backwards and closing the breech moved the bullet up into the barrel. The cartridge was unusual because it tapered to the rear rather than being thicker at the end. A standard percussion cap was used for ignition. The carbine was 39-1/2 inches long and weighed 7 pounds 2 ounces. Toward the end of the war, the Burnside Company retooled to produce the Spencer carbine. The lack of government contracts also forced this company to close in 1867.

Christian Spencer was a Connecticut Yankee when he received his patent in 1860 for the most technologically advanced weapon to see large scale use during the Civil War. His carbines and



rifles were 7 shot repeaters, loaded through an opening in the buttplate of the shoulder stock. The



.52 caliber rim fire brass or copper cartridges were self-contained -- bullet, gunpowder and primer like modern ammunition. The Spencer carbine was 39 inches long and weighed 8 pounds 4 ounces. President Abraham Lincoln personally tested the weapon, firing at a target near the Washington Monument.



The first Spencers were rifles; large deliveries of the carbines did not begin until October 1863 and by April 1865, about 46,000 Spencers were in service. Between April and December 1865 another 49,000 were delivered but were not actually used in the war. The total of 95,000 Spencers purchased often leads authors to declare that it was the most commonly used breechloader of the war when in actuality it was third. After the war many officers wanted the Spencer to remain the official weapon of the cavalry but it was replaced by the single shot "trapdoor" Springfield. Denied government contracts, Spencer's company went out of business in 1869.

The Smith carbine was invented by Gilbert Smith, a New York physician, no relation to Smith and Wesson Firearms. About 31,000 of the weapons were purchased by the Union Army, making it the fourth most common breechloader.



The weapon was loaded by pushing up on the plunger located in front of the trigger. This action

released a latch on the top of the barrel and the barrel then pivoted down on a hinge, allowing the cartridge to be placed in the chamber. Like most other carbines, it required a percussion cap for spark. The Smith carbine was .50 caliber, 39 inches in length and weighed 7-1/2 pounds. The most unusual feature of the gun was its cartridge. The gunpowder container was originally designed to be made of hard rubber. While it gave a good seal, it was difficult to extract the spent cartridge because the burning gunpowder caused some melting. Eventually, a foil and paper cartridge replaced the rubber version. Smith also went out of business after the war.

The first breechloading rifles and carbines adopted by the U.S. Army in 1823 were made by John Hall in his factory in Harpers Ferry. The first versions were flintlocks but Hall converted to percussion cap when that technology became available. Hall died in 1841 but production of his firearms continued until 1853, having served the troops fighting in the Seminole and Mexican Wars as well as arming the U.S. Dragoons (forerunner of the cavalry) on the frontier.



By the time of the Civil War, the Hall arms were obsolete and the Ordnance Department sold off 5,000 smoothbore carbines at \$3.50 each. The buyer had them rifled and refurbished for about \$1.00. In the early months of the war, the Union Army was desperate of any type of weapons and Maj. Gen. John Fremont, commanding in Missouri, bought the carbines for \$22.00. Although the weapons were not liked by the troops, they did provide arms at a time when they were needed. Unfortunately for Fremont, when word of the excess profit became public, it was one of the issues that was used to remove him from command, along with his order in 1861 freeing slaves (See *The Bugle*, Fall 2012).



Perhaps the most unusual breechloader of the Civil War was the Greene Rifle. It was a bolt action like modern rifles. The loading system was quite unique. For the first shot, the soldier pulled the bolt up and back. He then put a loose bullet put into the breech. The bolt was then pushed forward to seat the bullet in the chamber. The bolt was then pulled back again and a paper tube cartridge with a bullet in the back was placed in the breech and pushed forward and the bolt turned down to close the breech. Thus, the barrel contained a bullet, followed by a powder charge, and then another bullet. The ring in front of the trigger guard is an under hammer. The ring was pulled down to cock the hammer. When the trigger was pulled, the hammer snapped up and struck a percussion cap that was on the nipple. This ignited the paper and gunpowder and fired the weapon. The soldier would then reload by opening the bolt and pushing the bullet that had been in the back of the paper cartridge up into the chamber and then repeat the process of placing the paper cartridge in the breech. During the war, about 4,000 Greene rifles saw service, including use in the Battle of Antietam.

Most breechloaders were issued to the cavalry and their impact on the battlefield was relatively minor. Rarely did the outcome of a battle turn on the use of breechloaders. The Civil War was a proving ground for this new technology. Up to that time, such weapons had not received a long term field testing. That was one reason the Union Army purchased twenty-one different kinds of breechloaders. For the first two years of the war, they did not know which models would stand up to the rigors of campaigning. Once they determined the Sharps, Burnside, Spencer and Smith were the most reliable weapons, they started to withdraw the other arms and concentrate on those weapons.

# VDE Dancers Donate \$4,000 to Preservation

The Civil War Dance Foundation and its performing troupe, the Victorian Dance Ensemble, recently awarded \$4,000 in preservation and education grants to four organizations, each receiving \$1,000. “Each year, our dancers select organizations and causes to help support preservation and education. We are very pleased to make donations to these worthy organizations to help them preserve our history,” said Annette Keener-Farley, president of the Foundation. With this year’s donations, the total has now reached over \$39,000 since the group began awarding grants in 2001. Additionally, the CWDF’s balls and demonstrations have helped other organizations raise over \$150,000 for historic preservation and education by conducting balls and dance demonstrations.

## *This Year’s Recipients:*

**The Civil War Trust**, based in Washington, D.C., is the largest non-profit organization devoted to the preservation of our nation’s endangered Civil War battlefields. It has saved over 34,000 acres in twenty states. The Trust also promotes educational programs and heritage tourism initiatives to inform the public of the war’s history. Last year, the CWT launched “Campaign 150: Our Time, Our Legacy” to preserve an additional 20,000 acres during the sesquicentennial of the Civil War.

**Gettysburg National Military Park**, Gettysburg, Pa., received a grant for its Civil War Sesquicentennial living history programs in 2013. The Park is expecting an upsurge in visitation and an expanded living history program will help educate the public about history and the need for preservation.

**Liberia Plantation House** in Manassas, Va., was built in 1825 and served as headquarters for Confederate General P. G. T. Beauregard and as a hospital after the Battle of First Manassas. In the Spring of 1862, as the Union Army advanced into Virginia, General Irwin McDowell used the house

as his headquarters. President Abraham Lincoln visited the house to confer with McDowell. The Manassas Museum System has completed the first phase of structural restoration and the CWDF donation will help fund further restoration that is planned.

**The Col. Harry Gilmor Camp, Sons of Confederate Veterans, Adopt a Confederate Grave Project** is marking the graves of Confederate soldiers buried in Loudon Park Cemetery in Baltimore, Maryland. Many of the existing markers are unreadable so new stones are being made and placed flat on the ground in front of the markers, thus saving the original historic tombstones.



The Victorian Dance Ensemble has a long history with the Camp Curtin Historical Society and several dancers of the Ensemble are also members of the Society. The VDE danced at the Society’s Civil War Expositions and our Civil War Days (above). In 2005, the dancers donated \$1,000 to help Camp Curtin fund the Jenkins Monument.

The VDE will be offering free Civil War dance classes at the National Civil War Museum in January, February and March and will conduct the 10th Annual Civil War Preservation Ball in the Rotunda of the Pennsylvania Capitol Building on March 23. For information about the classes or the ball, visit [www.CivilWarDance.org](http://www.CivilWarDance.org).

# GNMP Winter Lecture Series Features 1863

From January through mid-March, the Gettysburg National Military Park rangers offer a series of lectures that touch on many different aspects of the Civil War and with the observance of the 150th Anniversary of the Civil War at hand, the programs will expand beyond the boundaries of the Gettysburg Campaign. The causes of the conflict, presidents and generals, the great battles and profound decisions, the aftermath and reconstruction with their ties to Gettysburg will be the focus of the series through 2015. Programs are held on Saturdays and Sundays at 1:30PM in the Gettysburg National Military Park Museum and Visitor Center. Check the Park website for a complete description of the lectures and any updates [www.nps.gov/gett](http://www.nps.gov/gett).

January 5 - *The Vicksburg Campaign: The Siege* with Matt Atkinson.

January 6 - *The Strategic Dilemma Faced by the Confederacy in 1863* with Bill Hewitt

January 12 - *Despair, Defeat, Redemption & Determination: The Army of the Potomac in 1863* with D. Scott Hartwig

January 19 - *If These Things Could Talk: Examining Gettysburg Artifacts* with Tom Holbrook

January 20 - *On Campaign with Fighting Joe Hooker and the Army of the Potomac in 1863* with Chris Gwinn

January 26 - *Gettysburg Understood Through Etymology, Metaphor and Personification* with Troy Harman

January 27 - *"We are having a grand time right now!" The Army of Northern Virginia in 1863* with John Heiser

February 2 - *The Bloodless Campaigns in Tennessee* with Bert Barnett

February 9 - *"Where death for noble ends makes dying sweet"* Robert Gould Shaw and the 54th Massachusetts with Chris Gwinn

February 10 - *"We Shall be Wiped Out of Existence"* - *From Calamity to Crisis: Oliver O. Howard, Out of Chancellorsville and into Gettysburg* with Chuck Teague

February 16 - *Burnside vs. Longstreet in East Tennessee: The Fall 1863 Knoxville Campaign* with John Hoptak

February 17 - *With Porter on the Mississippi – Union Naval Operations in the Vicksburg Campaign* with Karlton Smith

February 23 - *The Chancellorsville Campaign* with Greg Mertz or Frank O'Reilly of the Fredericksburg-Spotsylvania NMP.

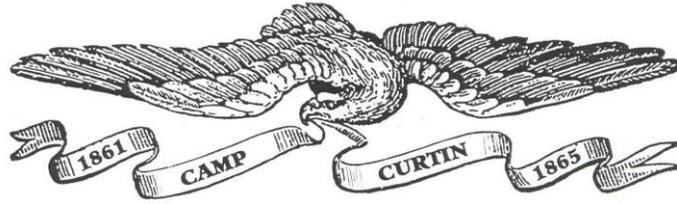
February 24 - *Gettysburg Redeemed: Bristoe Station, Mine Run, and the Fall Campaigns of 1863* with Dan Welch

March 2 - *Second Battle of Winchester: "The Thermopylae of my Campaign"* with Matt Atkinson

March 9 - *Pickett's Charge Explained Logically* with Troy Harman

March 10 - *The Fields of Gettysburg Through the Eyes of Battlefield Surgeons* with Barbara Sanders.





# *Camp Curtin Historical Society*

*presents*

**Cooper H. Wingert**

*speaking on*

## **The 26th Pennsylvania Volunteer Militia and the First Battle of Gettysburg**

This presentation will cover the 26th Pennsylvania Volunteer Militia, an "Emergency" unit raised from across the Keystone State during June 1863. The regiment saw action at Gettysburg four days before the great battle on July 1-2-3, 1863. This unit also spent several weeks in the Harrisburg area, in Camp Curtin, Fort Washington and White Hall (present-day Camp Hill), before marching south in pursuit of Lee's Army.

Cooper's book on the regiment has been accepted for publication and should be available for sale along with his other books.

**2:00PM, Sunday, February 24, 2013**

*at the Camp Curtin Memorial-Mitchell United Methodist Church  
2221 North Sixth Street, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania*

**This presentation is free. Bring a friend.**

The program will be preceded by the Camp Curtin Historical Society's annual meeting, including presentation of reports and elections

**For information call 717-732-5115 or email [genjenkins@aol.com](mailto:genjenkins@aol.com).**