

Vol LXI, #3

Michigan Regimental Round Table Newsletter—Page 1

March 2021

MEMBER RENEWAL

The MRRT celebrates its 61st year in 2021 – and now is a great time to show your support by renewing your membership! (Or become a new member!).

Membership is \$25 a year – or \$5 for students. Checks should be made out to

Treasurer **Jeanie Graham** (the bank does not like checks made out to the RoundTable) and can be mailed to her home at **29835 Northbrook, Farmington Hills, MI 48334-2326**.

The March 2021 meeting was cancelled because of the pandemic. We are optimistic that we will be able to meet during 2021 (in person or maybe virtually) and travel to the Culpepper, Virginia area for our field trip.

The Farmington Library remains in Phase 4 of their re-opening plan. The restrictions on the number of people in the library, 25, and only 30 minutes per visit is far short of what we need for a Roundtable meeting.

Please visit our website at <http://www.farmlib.org//mrrt>. Links to interesting Civil War programs are available.

Our congratulations to former Roundtable member from his high school days in Farmington, Chris Calkins! A portrait of Chris was installed in the visitor's center at the Sailor's Creek Battlefield Historical State Park near Farmville, Virginia. Chris worked at Sailor's Creek for more than a decade. He retired in January 2020, after 34 years with the National Park Service, serving at Appomattox and Petersburg National Battlefields. Chris was our tour guide on one of our field trips to Appomattox.

Civil War Essentials – Generals William Nelson and Jefferson Davis

General William “Bull” Nelson was a unique character in the Civil War and came to a unique but tragic end.

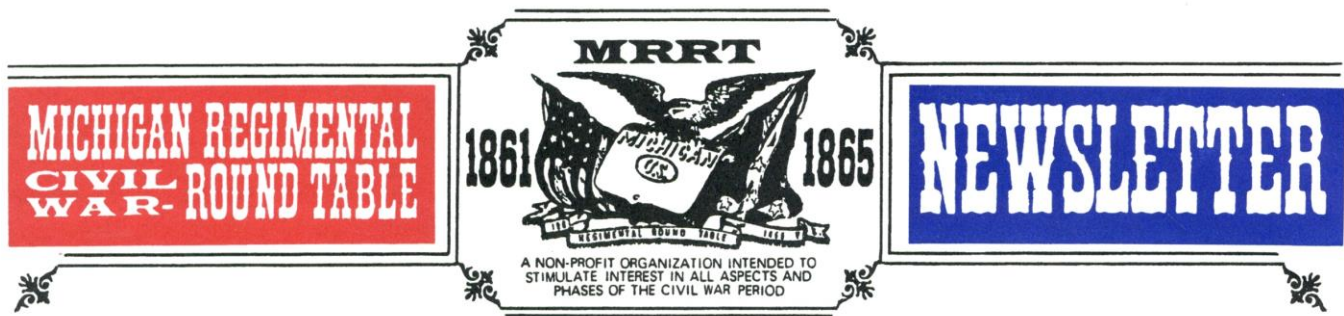
General Jefferson C. Davis, sharing the same name as the president of the Confederacy, was the cause of Nelson's demise even though they were both Union generals.

William Nelson was born in 1824 in Maysville, Kentucky located along the Ohio River southeast of Cincinnati. Son of a prominent physician, he attended a private academy and, at age 13, Norwich University. He was commissioned a Midshipman in 1840 and entered Annapolis Naval Academy the same year as part of the first class chosen to attend there. Upon graduating in 1846, he saw action during the war with Mexico. **As an adult, Nelsen was a giant of a man standing**

6 ft. 4 inches tall with an ample girth (photo below). **His physique and gruff, hard edged personality, honed by years of dealing with unruly ships' crews, earned him the nickname “Bull”.**



At the beginning of the Civil War, Nelsen was a lieutenant in the Navy. **Always a Kentuckian at heart, and loyal to the Union, Nelson began to organize loyal militia in his state** which had declared itself neutral in the spring of 1861. His efforts to rally support for the Union in the state were considered crucial in Kentucky's ultimate decision to remain loyal. In the fall of 1861, he was made a Union brigadier general of volunteers and placed in command in eastern Kentucky. Although often resented by his subordinates for his harsh manners, he led his troops to several local victories before being made a divisional commander in Don Carlos Buell's Army of the Ohio. His unit was the first in Buell's army to arrive at Pittsburg Landing to succor Grant's hard-pressed troops at the end of the first day of the Battle of Shiloh. **By August 1862, William Nelson was both a major general of volunteers in the Army and a lieutenant commander in the Navy!!**



In August, the rebel leaders Kirby Smith and Bragg both penetrated into Kentucky in their attempts to bring the state over into the Confederacy and threaten Cincinnati. **Nelson was ordered to organize Kentucky's defenses. He expressed his dissatisfaction with the lack of discipline and organization he found among the troops he had to work with and did so in strong language.** His two brigades were badly defeated by Kirby Smith's army at the town of Richmond south of Lexington, Kentucky with Nelson suffering a leg wound during the battle.

Nelson moved first to Cincinnati to recover from his wound but returned to Louisville in mid-September as the Confederates threatened that key city. He took command there establishing his headquarters at the Galt House, a luxury hotel. Critics would later contend that he added to the fear and unrest in the city by a provocative order that all non-combatants were to exit the city and cross over into Indiana. Many called for his replacement, but influential supporters rallied to successfully defend him. Among other actions, Nelson ordered General Jefferson C. Davis to organize local men into an additional fighting force. **This order began the string of events that was to result in Nelson's death.**

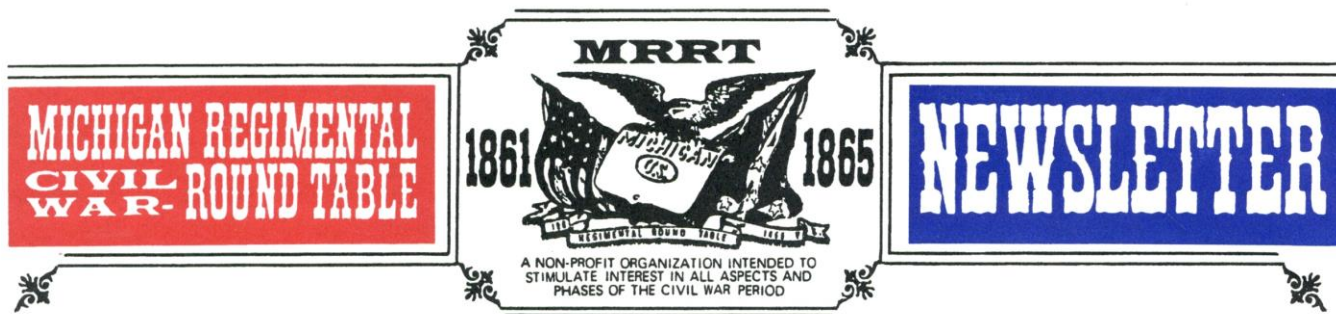
Indiana-born Davis (photo below) was a few years younger than Nelson. **Unlike many key Civil War leaders, Davis had not attended a military academy.** After enlisting as a private during the Mexican American War, he had been promoted to sergeant, then was "mustanged" up to 2nd lieutenant at the end of that war. In 1861, he was part of the Fort Sumter garrison under Major Anderson. Davis competently led troops in several key battles in the west including Wilson's Creek, Pea Ridge, and 2nd Corinth. **His career had been helped along by Indiana's governor, the influential Oliver Morton.** Davis was physically the opposite of Bull Nelson – 5 ft. 9 inches tall and about 135 lbs. By September 1862, he was now a brigadier general and was recovering from an illness.



Davis felt that organizing a "rabble of citizens" as he called them was beneath him as a Regular Army officer and evidently did little to try to accomplish it. **Called on the carpet by Nelson, the two officers argued publicly and Nelson relieved Davis of his command,** an order which Davis insisted Nelson had no authority to issue. Finally, Davis left Louisville for Cincinnati. Before returning to Louisville, Davis met with Governor Morton who then accompanied him back to Kentucky. **This added more tension to the Nelson/Davis relationship as Nelson and Morton strongly disliked each other.**

On the morning of September 29, 1862 Nelson was in the lobby of the Galt House when he spotted Davis and Morton approaching. The argument began again. Accounts vary but **one version had Davis throwing a crumpled-up card at Nelson's face after the latter had insulted him. Immediately Nelson responded by slapping the smaller man.** After a short, harsh exchange of words with Morton, Nelson turned to return to his room vowing to another nearby officer that he would "*teach that scoundrel [Davis] a lesson*". Davis seized a British Tranter revolver from another officer and followed Nelson. **At close range, he fired a single shot into Nelson's chest. "Bull" Nelson died shortly afterward.** General Davis would offer two different versions of why he shot Nelson. At first, he contended that it was an accident caused by his unfamiliarity with that pistol – a double action weapon. Later he said he could not accept the insults Nelson had directed at him without losing his self-respect.

Although Davis was placed under arrest, the realities of the military situation dictated that not enough general officers would be available to conduct a proper court-martial. The Provost Guard had to be deployed to prevent violence between officers and troops of the two generals. Newspapers lined up on each side with most supporting Davis because of Nelson's well-known brutal nature. Although President Lincoln had been grateful for Nelson's efforts to keep



Kentucky in the Union in 1861, he was also aware that Morton and Indiana were key to the war effort, so he was quiet on the whole matter.

Nelson's remains were moved several times before finally being interred in his hometown, Maysville. Davis was released in mid-October and a manslaughter charge was eventually dropped. General Jefferson C. Davis participated in most of the remaining major battles in the Western theater as a competent commander, rising to command the XIV Corps. **He was however never promoted beyond brevet brigadier general in the regular army.** Another black mark on his record was his December 1864 order to remove a pontoon bridge over a creek so that escaped slaves could not continue to follow Sherman's army. They were left to be recaptured by Confederate cavalry. After the war, he served in newly purchased Alaska and then replaced General Edward Canby who had been murdered by Modoc Indians during an 1873 peace parley. Davis died in 1879 of natural causes.

General William Nelson and Confederate General Earl Van Dorn were both murdered in front of witnesses during the war. In both instances, their killers went unpunished!!

Quiz Questions: This month's questions pertain to the month of March.

1. March 9, 1865: Which Federal general was almost captured in his bed at Monroe's Crossroads, South Carolina, by Generals Wade Hampton and Joe Wheeler? And, because he ingloriously fled without his trousers, what nickname was given to this episode?
2. March 11, 1862: Which 2 generals did President Jefferson Davis relieve for the disaster at Fort Donelson a month earlier?
3. March 14, 1863: Which critical Louisiana bastion on the Mississippi River did Admiral David Farragut lead his squadron past? What was Farragut's flagship?
4. March 28, 1862: What battle took place at a spot called Pigeon's Ranch in New Mexico? And, which Federal Major, who later gained a notorious reputation for an indiscriminate slaughter, helped save Union forces by destroying Confederate wagons and supplies, causing them to retreat to Texas?
5. March 1, 1865: Which Union state ratified the 13th Amendment to end slavery for all time? Which Union state rejected the same amendment?

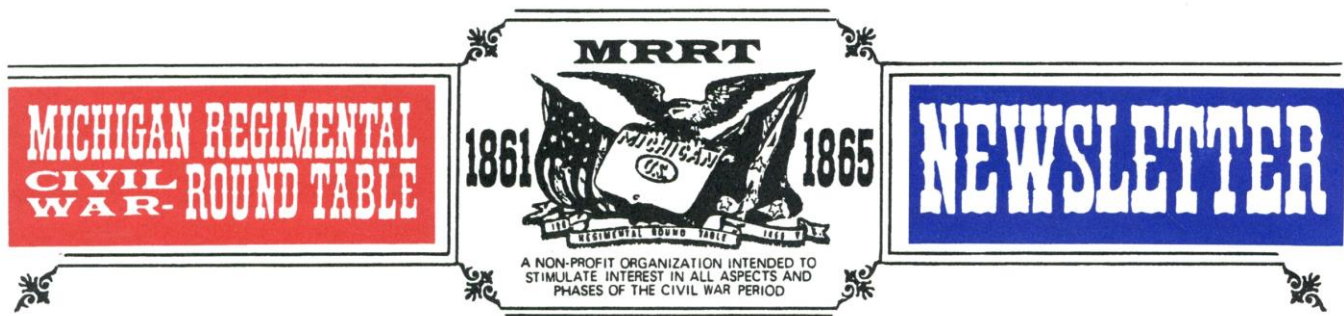
Our thanks to "Old Sarge" for his help with these questions.

Civil War Essentials – Unknown Confederate Naval Hero Eugene Matthew O'Brien

Eugene Matthew O'Brien was a steam engineer who fought the Civil War on the oceans of the world aboard the first (*CSS Sumter*), the most famous (*CSS Alabama*) and the last (*CSS Shenandoah*) of the Confederate commerce raiders. He sailed further and served longer than any man in the war. He rose from third assistant on the *Sumter* to chief engineer on the *Shenandoah*.

Eugene was born in County Limerick, Ireland in 1837 and immigrated to the United States with his family six years later, settling in New Orleans. Starting at age 15, in 1852, he became an apprentice in the machine shop at Leed's foundry. **He joined the Confederate Navy on May 20, 1861 and was assigned to the *Sumter*.** The *Sumter* was a small, slow merchant steamer, ill-suited for long-distance cruising, one of the few vessels available for conversion to a warship. However, the captain Raphael Semmes, would eventually become the Confederacy's most famous sailor as commander of the *Alabama*.

After the *Sumter* slipped past the Union blockaders at New Orleans in June 1861, the ship captured eighteen United States flag ships in the Caribbean and South Atlantic until trapped at Gibraltar in April 1862 by Union warships and engineering problems. Access to industrial repair facilities was already becoming a major problem for the Confederacy a year into the war.



Eugene O’Brien was able to follow Raphael Semmes to the *Alabama* (picture below), the first warship built from the keel up solely for commerce raiding—small but sustainable for long cruises, light, fast, and lightly armed. From August 1862 to June 1864, the *Alabama* engaged in the most dramatic and destructive cruise of the war, capturing sixty-five prizes valued at nearly \$6 million ranging as far as the South China Sea. The *USS Kearsarge* sank the *Alabama* off the Cherbourg, France coast only after the *Alabama* was wore out.



Lieutenant Arthur Sinclair of the *Alabama* wrote, “O’Brien’s skill and resource were very unusual, even in the line to which officers of his grade are most carefully trained”. The ship cruised for two years without access to machine shops and dockyards. At the end of the *Alabama*, her machinery was in excellent condition and her boilers still available. Sinclair discussed O’Brien further, “He was without exception the jolliest fellow I ever met and possessed a wonderful power of imparting cheerfulness and good-nature to every person with whom he came in contact. He had a marvelous faculty for discovering the ludicrous side of misfortune and could paint the silver

lining of the darkest clouds of our discount.”

Eugene was wounded during the fight with the *Kearsarge* when an 11-inch shell pierced the waterline amidships. Blasted through the coal bunker and exploded destroying the engine room. This was the death blow for the *Alabama*. The English yacht *Deerhound* pulled O’Brien and his captain from the water and was available when called to serve as chief engineer on the *Shenandoah*.

The *Shenandoah* was a British clipper ship with a steam engine built in 1863 for the China tea trade. The Confederates purchased the vehicle and strengthened the decks and added guns. From October 1864 to November 1865 (several months after the end of the war) the *Shenandoah* invaded the North, the Bering Sea, and fired the last gun of the war.

The *Shenandoah* limped into Liverpool harbor in November 1865. Captain Waddell lowered the last Confederate banner without defeat or surrender. Eugene O’Brien had to restart his life after three years at sea, Eugene O’Brien returned to New Orleans and the employ of the Morgan Steamship Line, eventually becoming the federal district inspector steam vessels.

Quiz Answers:

1. Hugh Judson Kilpatrick and “The Battle of Kilpatrick’s Pants”
2. Generals Gideon J. Pillow and John B. Floyd
3. Port Hudson, Louisiana. *U.S.S. Hartford*
4. La Glorieta Pass and John M. Chivington
5. Wisconsin and New Jersey