

Vol LXIV, #5

Michigan Regimental Round Table Newsletter—Page 1

May 2024

MEMBER RENEWAL

The MRRT celebrates its 64th year in 2024 – and now is a wonderful 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**. Cash is always welcome at our meetings.

Sadly, our long-time friend and member Dr. Martin Brosnan, PhD, 92, passed away on May 6, 2024. Martin spoke to our group several times on interesting topics and enjoyed several of our field trips. Martin was an U.S. Army veteran, serving along the German-Czech border during the 1950's. He turned down an opportunity to attend West Point and went into a very satisfying career in education. Martin also worked at Greenfield Village. He will be missed.

Our May meeting will be on Monday, May 20, 2024, at 6:30 pm in the basement of the Farmington Library – corner of Grand River and Farmington Road. This is one week earlier than normal because of Memorial Day. Our **guest speaker, Dr. Roy E. Finkenbine, a History Professor at the University of Detroit Mercy**, will begin around 7:00 pm after our 6:30 pm business meeting. **We must leave the library by 8:45 pm.**

Linda is making great progress organizing our October 26th and 27th trip to the Nashville area. Our Saturday, October 26th, guide is Joseph Ricci. He is the historian for the Battle of Franklin Trust. Joseph will share with us the stories of the battles of Columbia, Spring Hill, and Franklin. Our Sunday, October 27th, guide is Lee White, who led us on our tour of Chickamauga and Chattanooga in 2018. Sunday will be primarily devoted to the Battle of Nashville. We will be staying at the Best Western in Franklin, near the battlefield. Best Western's telephone number is 615.790.0570. We have a block of rooms under the Michigan Regimental Roundtable for Friday, Saturday, and Sunday nights.

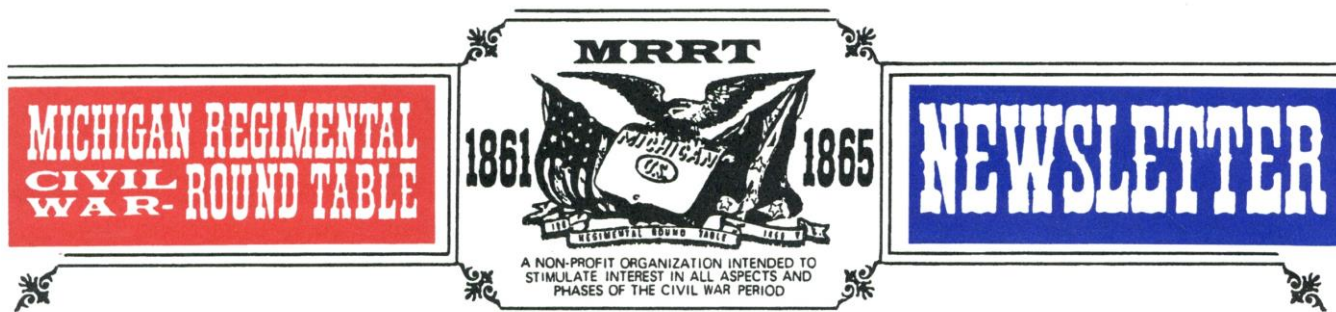
If you want to join our tour, we may contact Linda Gerhardt at lindagerhardt99@gmail.com or Jeanie Graham at grahamjeanie@hotmail.com. Please sign up for our great trip at our next meeting.

The Roundtable has a great new website, created by our friend, Gerald Furi. We are no longer connected to the Farmington Library. The website is: <https://www.mrrt.us>

The Roundtable is proud to welcome as our May 2024 speaker, Dr. Roy E. Finkenbine, who will share with us his story of "What Caused the Civil War." During our studies of the Civil War, we have read discussions of what caused the great American war. Southerners expressed a strong defense of state sovereignty and rights. There was a belief that the North and South were divergent civilizations. Slavery is the issue that must be discussed with the war, Dr. Finkenbine will share with us his research on this important topic. **This will be an interesting and educational presentation!**

Roy is a Professor of History at the University of Detroit Mercy. He teaches courses in African American history, modern Africa, slave resistance, the Civil War era, and the Underground Railroad. He received his doctorate from Bowling Green State University in Ohio in 1982 and joined the Detroit Mercy faculty in 1996.

The Roundtable appreciated and enjoyed Rita Walodka's self-portrayal of the eventful life of Mary Todd Lincoln. Anita discussed Mary's eventful life in the first person.



My whole story has never been told. I aided Abraham Lincoln in becoming President of the United States. I grew up as a member of a wealthy family in Lexington, KY, the “*Athens of the West.*” My mother, Elizabeth, died in childbirth. I did not like my father’s new wife. Then, I was sent away to boarding school. Dad and Mom had six children and eight stepchildren in our Lexington home.

I moved to Springfield, Illinois, on a two-week trip from Lexington, to live with my sister, Elizabeth. Elizabeth was very well-connected socially. My eyes made me popular as I was invited to parties, teas, and dances – where **I met Abraham.** He wanted to “*dance with me in the worst way,*” which came true. We courted off and on, off and on, for three years. We married on short notice. **Abraham said, “I fell in love with my wife and never fell out of love.”**



I have a couple of stories of life with Abraham. I dumped a pan of water on him when he ignored her. Afterwards, he just kept on going. One day, he ran down the street, not realizing that one of our sons had fallen from a ladder that Abraham had pulled. I took care of our four boys on my own, with Elizabeth’s help.

The boys were Robert, Eddie, Willie, and Tad. Eddy died at only four years old. I became physically ill after he died.

Abraham became the Republican candidate for President in 1860, over two hundred people waited for election returns in front of our Springfield home. Abraham yelled, “*We have been elected.*” I became his political partner, even though we were not a good match. I was born into money; Lincoln was in the backwoods politically.

The White House required a major upgrade in living conditions, the shabby carpet and drapes needed to be replaced. I went to work after receiving \$20,000. An armed escort accompanied me on my shopping trip to New York. After my New York purchases were added to the White House, everyone said what

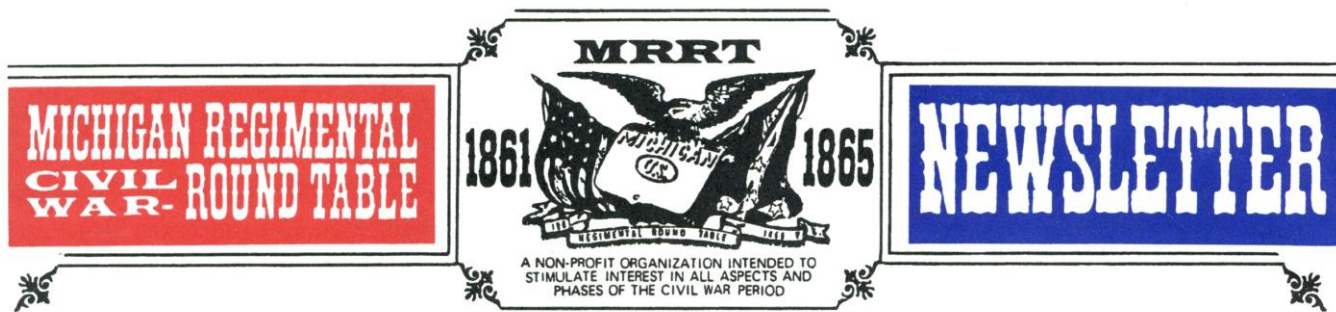
a wonderful job that I had done. Then I received major criticism from the public for overspending by \$6,700. Yes, I know that a bloody war is going on.

I visited a free Black woman to have her make a gown for the next day’s Inauguration Ball. The wonderful gown was not ready until just before the party started. The dressmaker took care of the gown and my hair. Abraham said, “*You look lovely,*” She became my friend and dressmaker during our time in the White House.

People were saying that I was spending too much money and having too many parties. I planned one grand ball with five hundred invitees on a limited budget. Two hundred of the invitees turned back their invitations because of the war. During this period, my beloved Todd had typhus. The party was successful after Todd’s Doctor said it was ok to have the party. I spoke French to the international attendees!

Sadly, Todd passed away. Lincoln told me to get myself together or go to the insane asylum. I went to spiritualists. I felt better every time that I went shopping.

Can you believe it, the press said that I was a Confederate spy. I had relatives in the Confederate army. Lincoln had to tell Congress that I was not a spy.



After the surrender at Appomattox Court House, we went to Ford’s Theater to see the comedy, “Our American Cousin.” During one of the funniest parts of the play, I heard a large pop and Lincoln fell to the floor. I was with hm at Peterson House across the street. I had a full throbbing headache and was too ill to go the funeral or travel on the funeral train to Springfield.

My son Robert did not know about the debts that I had incurred. Congress did give \$1,300 as a special package for Presidential widows. I sold nineteen dresses. The dreadful press said that I was a money grabber.

We booked a passage to Europe. Everyone was very gracious to me. Robert got married and I now have a wonderful grandchild.

How sad I am. Tad died of the same problem that his older brother died of. Now, my husband and three of our four children have died!

Robert put me in a private sanitorium where I became calmer and quieter. After four months I went to live with my sister Elizabeth again. I got my money and property back. Robert and I did not reconcile afterwards.

Then, I had health problems. I fell off a stool and hurt my back. My eyesight was failing. After a stroke I died in 1882 at the age of sixty-three. **I am now with Abraham and three of my sons in Springfield for eternity.**

A great thank you to Anita for your presentation!

Civil War Essentials - Cornelius Vanderbilt – a Ruthless Millionaire and Union Patriot

Cornelius Vanderbilt was the mid-Nineteenth Century prototype of the self-made American millionaire

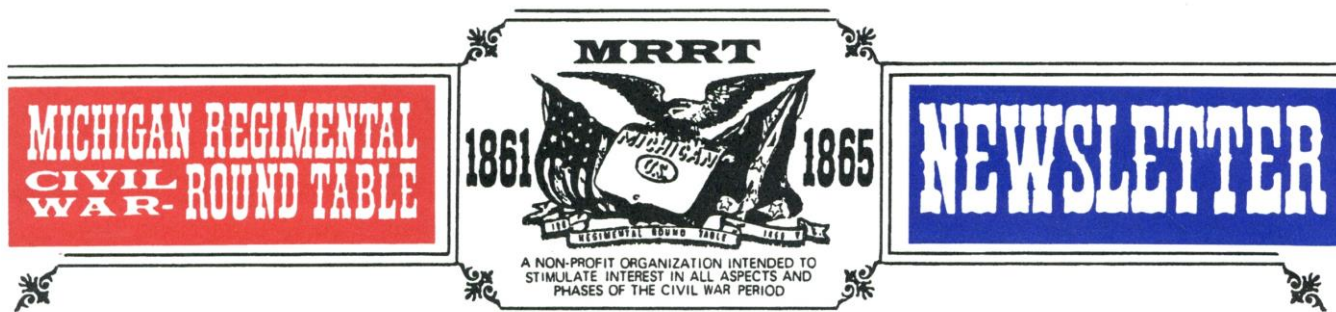
businessman. Before the likes of Andrew Carnegie, John D. Rockefeller, or J. P. Morgan, Vanderbilt rose by his own efforts from a poor Staten Island farm boy to be one of the richest men in America.

Rise to the Top Vanderbilt was born in 1794 when the US economy was composed of agriculture and small single proprietor businesses – corporations were unknown. As the spelling and grammar of his letters and written documents clearly demonstrate, he truly had little school education. Starting with a small cargo boat owned by his farmer father, the tall, tough youth mastered the rough-and-tumble freight and passenger trade of New York Harbor - with both brains and fists! By the beginning of the Civil War, the “Commodore,” as he was nicknamed, had come to dominate the steamboat trade in New York, the trans-Atlantic routes to Britain and the route from Central America to New York over which the gold bullion of the California gold rush was shipped. To do so, he helped form the beginnings of the corporation-dominated world of today. **To support his marine business, he constructed numerous large ocean-going steamers, including one he named after himself, the *Vanderbilt* (picture below).**

Photo # NH 60881 USS Vanderbilt. Artwork by Clary Ray



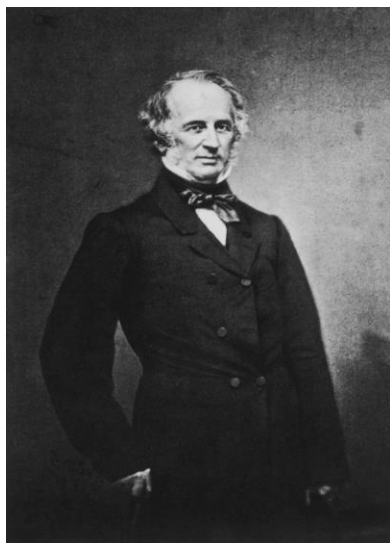
In the War Like other men in the New York shipping business, Vanderbilt had profited from the huge volume of southern cotton shipped to Britain and New England. Indeed, early in 1861 then Mayor Fernando Wood had proposed that New York City also secede and stand as a free city to preserve that arrangement! Still, after Fort Sumter was fired on, patriotism swept the city. A group of wealthy men organized the Union Defense Committee and large numbers of men answered the president’s call for 75,000 volunteers.



The Confederate April 17, 1861, decision to issue Letters of Marque caused great alarm among the city's shipping line owners. They knew that their ships, including the bullion carriers, which passed along the east coast would be prime targets for these privateers. Vanderbilt wrote to Navy Secretary Welles requesting that the navy supply a few cannons and small arms for their steamboats to help defend themselves; Welles declined his request.

Vanderbilt in the war did not end there. A few days after the epic battle between the *CSS Virginia* and the *USS Monitor* on March 9, 1862, concern that the rebel ship might yet defeat the *Monitor* persisted. **A still jittery Secretary of War Stanton send a telegram to Cornelius Vanderbilt asking him whether he would arm and prepare the *Vanderbilt* (photo) to take on the "Merrimack" (*Virginia*) in case it did defeat the Union ironclad in a return battle.** The Commodore immediately arranged to have his namesake ship prepared for war by further strengthening its bow for ramming. By late March, the *Vanderbilt* arrived at Norfolk. Although not an ironclad, the 330-foot-long ship was over twice as fast and more agile than the *Virginia* and would be a deadly ramming threat to that slow, unwieldy vessel. Although the two ironclads glowered at each other several times in the next 2 months, there was no further actual combat. In May 1862, the *Virginia* was blown up by its crew to prevent its capture by McClellan's advancing army.

The Commodore arranged to charter steamships needed for wartime operations and did so without asking for a commission for himself or using middlemen who usually charged the government a 2.5 to 5% commission. **Vanderbilt sold his \$900,000 namesake ship to the navy for \$1. It was armed with fifteen cannons during the summer of 1862 to deal with the newly launched Confederate raider, the *Alabama* whose captain, Semmes, was eager to capture one of Vanderbilt's ships carrying California gold from Panama to New York.** Although it undertook two cruises during this search, the *Vanderbilt* never found its prey. Some of the second cruise was wasted when the squadron commander, the notorious Charles Wilkes, decided it would make an ideal, comfortable flagship for him. **The *Vanderbilt* did capture several blockade runners including the *RMS Peterhoff*, an action which caused yet another diplomatic dispute with the British.** After the war, she accompanied the ironclad *USS Monadnock* "round the Horn" to San Francisco.



Afterwards Just before the war, Cornelius Vanderbilt (photo) began to turn from steamboats to railroads where his greatest fame lies today. Throughout his life, he had a reputation for being driven and ruthless but honest in his business dealings. A recent historian wrote of him, "Hated, revered, resented, he always commanded respect, even from his enemies." He had often been brutal in combat with his business competitors (including occasional fisticuffs even as a mature adult), yet **he was also among those northerners who together raised the \$100,000 bail needed to release Jefferson Davis from his prison cell in Fort Monroe in 1867.**

As great a patriot of the post-war US as of the Union during the war, he gave almost \$1 Million beginning in 1873 to fund Central University in Nashville as a gift to the still recovering south (and to compensate for his lack of a formal education). **Today it is known as Vanderbilt University.** When he died in 1877, he was estimated to be worth over \$100 million – equivalent to many billions today.

The Roundtable Congress will be having two symposiums this summer. One will be at Shenandoah University in Winchester, VA from 9-4 on Saturday, July 27th. The other one will be at the Indiana War Memorial in Indianapolis on Saturday, August 24th, also from 9-4. These two events will discuss the sustainability of Civil War Roundtables.