The Alexandria Chronicle

A publication of monographs about historical Alexandria, Virginia.

Alexandria Historical Society, Inc. 201 South Washington Street • Alexandria, Virginia 22314

Editor: Linda Greenberg Fall 2006

It is with considerable pleasure that the Alexandria Historical Society publishes this edition of *The Alexandria Chronicle* in memory of J. Patten Abshire.

Pat, as we knew him, was, in addition to being a historian and writer, a long time member of the Society and served on its Board of Directors. He was our legal advisor, and we relied and appreciated his good advice.

I first met Pat when he volunteered at the Lee Boyhood Home Museum where he frequently appeared at historic costume events. Pat was a good friend and, when he died in March of 1997, Alexandria lost a valued citizen. Before his death he left the Alexandria Historical Society a legacy that has enabled us to establish an endowment fund for publications.

James H. Johnson
Past President

* * * * *

My slightly older brother Patten and I grew up in our grandmother's house on a very tall hill in Chattanooga, Tennessee, overlooking the sweep of the Moccasin Bend of the Tennessee River. Before us was a perfect view of the extended Mission Ridge, as well as the towering Lookout Mountain.

Our grandfather, Major George Washington Patten, a federal officer, charged Mission Ridge in 1863. His younger brother, then Corporal Zeb Patten, fought and was wounded in the bloody battle of Chickamauga, also in 1863. Both later settled in this railroad center and went into business successfully. We claim that they were the best of the carpetbaggers.

The Abshire family came from a farm near Roanoke, Virginia, and fought for the Confederacy in Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia. It is no wonder that Pat took such a keen interest in the war events around Chattanooga where we grew up, as well as Alexandria, our acquired home.

It is with pleasure and honor that I have been given the opportunity by the Alexandria Historical Society to introduce these two articles about the Civil War by my brother Patten Abshire.

David Abshire, President
Center for the Study of the Presidency

(Note: Patten Abshire's career included a stint as a lawyer, a professor at American University, a staff member on Capitol Hill, and an employee of Chattam Chemical Company.)

The following permission applies to both articles:
Copyright © 1995/1997 News World Communications, Inc. Reprinted with permission of *The Washington Times*. This reprint does not constitute or imply any endorsement or sponsorship of any product, service, company or organization.

The photo of the marksman is an engraving after a painting by Winslow Homer in the Library of Congress.

As war went on, technology dictated strategy

"Look, General Lee, at the insurmountable difficulties between our line and that of the Yankees – the steep hills, the tiers of artillery, the fences, the heavy skirmish line – and then we'll have to fight our infantry against their batteries." — *Gen. James Longstreet*

"The enemy is there, General Longstreet, and I am going to strike him." — *Gen. Robert E. Lee*

"Our men are falling faster now, for the deadly musket is at work. Volley after volley of crushing musket balls sweeps through the lines and mows us down like wheat before the scythe." — *Pvt. John Dooley*

By J. Patten Abshire
SPECIAL TO THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Why did the Civil War's immortal military genius, Robert E. Lee, ignore at Gettysburg the important lesson of Fredericksburg that the tactical defense held the advantage over the offense? There he had witnessed the slaughter of more than 8,000 charging Union infantry at the foot of Marye's Heights by massed Confederate artillery and rifled-musket fire.

Perhaps Lee was unduly influenced by the doctrines of Antoine Henry Jomini, taught at West Point in the 1820s, that the offense had the edge over the defense. But after the Napoleonic Wars, the scientific advances of the Industrial Revolution changed previous notions of military strategy.

From ancient times to the 20th century, small alterations in weapons have resulted in huge modifications in combat, according to Archer Jones in "The Art of War in the Western World." Going back to the eighth century, he finds that the availability of the stirrup in Western Europe conferred on the heavy cavalry a crucial advantage over heavy infantry. In the 18th century, the bayoneted musket shifted advantage back to infantry.

The Industrial Revolution created a unique period in warfare from 1700 to 1916, and the American Civil War became the testing ground for many new arms.

The advent of superior defensive technology, including the rifled musket, canister and effective explosive artillery shells dictated the mode of warfare early in the Civil War.

The most innovative infantry weapon was the muzzle-loading rifle firing the Minie ball (bullet). Its longer range and greater accuracy meant that defenders could start firing sooner at greater distances and reload for more volleys before closing with the enemy, thus augmenting the power of the tactical defense.

After the weapon's adoption by both North and South, attacks on well-defended entrenched positions were seldom successful. If the generals didn't understand this, the infantrymen knew it and entrenched at every opportunity. It was their blood that was spilled during imprudent charges.

Examples of the supremacy of the defense on Civil War battlefields abound. During the Seven Days, Maj. Gen. George McClellan, fighting on the defensive, lost only 20 percent of his available force to Lee's loss of 30 percent. Later, at Franklin, the dramatic charge of the Army of Tennessee against Union infantry behind breastworks, armed with rifles and some repeaters and supported by artillery, cost more than 6,000 Confederate dead and wounded. This dwarfed Gen. George Edward Pickett's loss of 1,354 at Gettysburg.

Near the end of the war, Lee dramatically shifted his tactics to counter Gen. Ulysses S. Grant's move on Richmond. From the outset, Grant attempted to maneuver Lee into open combat, where Grant's superior numbers could destroy the Confederate army.

Recognizing the killing power of the rifled musket and artillery in the hands of his forces, Lee countered Grant's moves and confronted him with entrenched defenses at every turn. Grant's attempts to take Cold Harbor cost him 12,000 killed or wounded against Lee's casualties of not more than 1,500.

Foremost in the mind of Confederate Gen. Joseph E. Johnston during his retreat to Atlanta was to take

the advantage of the tactical defense. He later explained: "I therefore thought it our policy to stand on the defensive to spare the blood of our soldiers by fighting under cover habitually and to attack only when bad position or division of the enemy's forces might give us an advantage to counterbalance that of superior numbers."

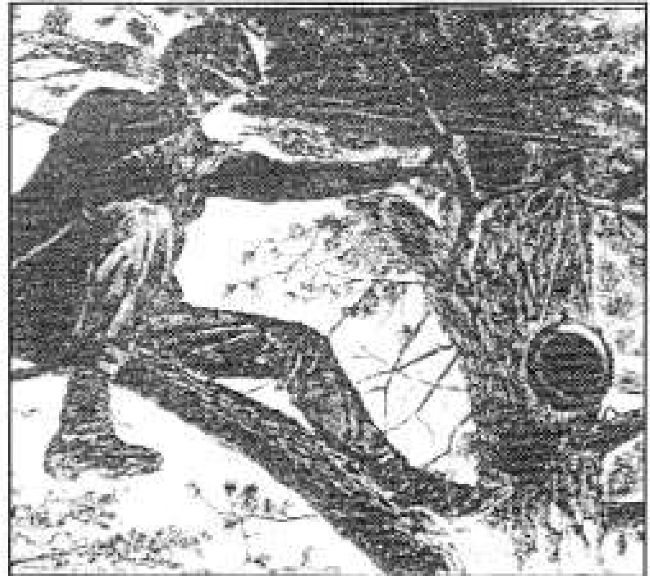
Grant agreed that Johnston's tactics were right. President Jefferson Davis' replacement of Johnston by Lt. Gen. John B. Hood to shift the Confederate tactics from cautious defense to bold offense evidenced a lack of appreciation of the changes in warfare wrought by the Industrial Revolution and may have hastened the collapse of the Confederacy.

In contrast, President Lincoln understood that the Industrial Revolution would have a profound effect on Civil War battles. He believed that new weapons, such as the breach-loading rifle, could win the war. But, according to William Hallahan in "Misfire," Lincoln's efforts were thwarted by his intransigent generals, who failed to appreciate that the new weapons would make obsolete the strategies and tactics they had learned early in their careers.

Lincoln's chief of ordnance, Gen. James Wolfe Ripley, delayed adoption of the rapid-firing breach loader, for instance, fearing it would lead the troops to waste ammunition. New means of transportation and communication also dramatically affected logistics and strategies of the Civil War. Both North and South made extensive use of the railroad and steamer to move men and supplies over the vast areas over which the war was fought. The conflict also featured the first wide-scale use in warfare of the electric telegram for communication and command.

General-in-Chief Winfield Scott's "envelopment" strategy, with a blockage by sea and a fleet of gunboats supported by soldiers along the Mississippi, relied on the railroad for the movement of troops and supplies and on steam-powered warships. As Mr. Jones points out in "The Art of War in the Western World," Grant's implementation of this envelopment concept at Shiloh was made possible by the use of the telegraph, railroad and steamer.

Both sides made impressive use of the railroads during the battles of Chickamauga and Chattanooga. To strengthen Confederate Gen. Braxton Bragg's army in North Georgia, Davis sent Lt. Gen. James Longstreet and his 12,000 veterans from Virginia on a 900-mile rail excursion to Chickamauga Creek. It was those veterans from the Army of Northern Virginia who gave the South its last great victory at Chickamauga and sent Union Gen. William S. Rosecrans' Army of the Cumberland back across the Georgia-Tennessee border to Chattanooga.



A marksman uses a rifled barrel and telescopic sight on his weapon.

In turn, Lincoln reinforced Rosecrans' beleaguered forces with 20,000 men from the Army of the Potomac transported by rail from Culpeper over 1,233 miles of Union territory to a railhead near Chattanooga. James McPherson in "Battle Cry of Freedom" characterizes this as an "extraordinary feat of logistics" and "the longest and fastest movement before the twentieth century."

The significance of this use of the railroad to support the Union forces besieged at Chattanooga was immense. It enabled Gen. Grant, when he arrived at Chattanooga, to defeat one of the two major Confederate armies, which crushed Southern morale and provided Gen. William T. Sherman with the staging point for his campaign to capture Atlanta.

Most of the leaders of the Union and the Confederacy were oblivious early in the war to the role innovative naval technology could play. The U.S. Navy had been neglected since 1815, and the South had no naval tradition.

Ironically, American inventors had been at the forefront in developing new naval weapon systems. John Dahlgren, a regular naval officer, had discovered how

to make stronger large-caliber guns. The evolution of shells that could penetrate ship timbers focused the attention of forward-looking officers on ironclads. John Ericsson, the Swedish inventor who came to America, had developed the screw propeller for steam vessels whose more powerful systems could be protected by armor.

In the 1860s, European powers began incorporating these new technologies into their navies. The American Civil War provided their first test in battle. Confederate Secretary of the Navy Stephen R. Mallory was more progressive than his Union counterpart, Gideon Wells. Mallory understood and adopted the new technologies of ironclads, submarines and mines (torpedoes), but he did not have the resources to make this decisive.

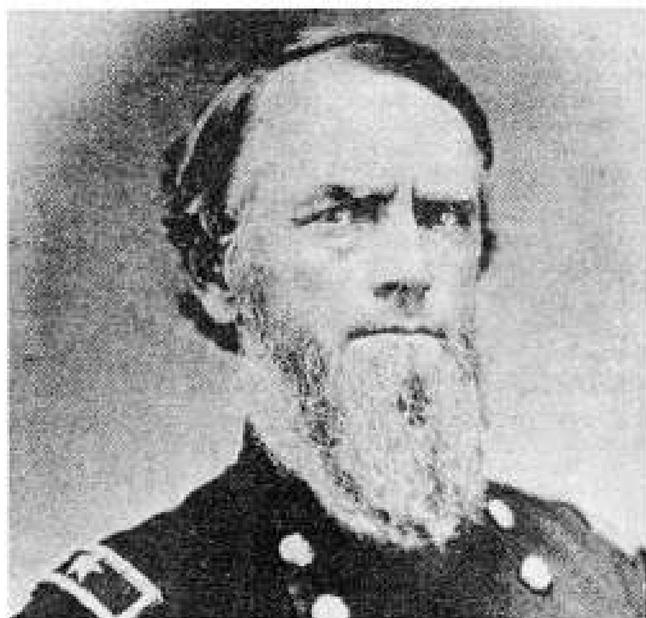
The South was the first to launch an ironclad, the Merrimack. At Hampton Roads, this made-over wooden steamship devastated the Union fleet. The North followed with the Monitor, a more advanced warship designed by Ericsson. Although the clash of these two ironclads was inconclusive, they demonstrated definitively the dominance of steam-powered armored vessels over wooden sailing craft.

To control the rivers and harbors the Union navy adopted a new class of shallow-draft river monitors and converted river steamers. These played a crucial role in dominating the Mississippi River and splitting the Confederacy in half.

The tactical use of these river gunboats in support of infantry brought on the surrender of Forts Henry and Donelson on the Tennessee and Cumberland rivers, opening the way for Union advances into Tennessee and started the little-known brigadier general named Grant on his road to Appomattox and the White House.

J. Patten Abshire is a retired attorney serving on the board of the Alexandria Historical Society and a docent at the Boyhood Home of Robert E. Lee. His great grandfather fought at Chickamauga, Chattanooga and Franklin, and he was an infantryman in the European theater in World War II.

The 115th Illinois and its test at Chickamauga



The Rev. Jesse Hale Moore, instrumental in organizing the 115th Illinois Regiment, eventually became known as "the fighting preacher." Zeboim Cartter Patten was one of the first to enlist in the regiment and was one of the first in Company H to be wounded at Snodgrass Hill.

By. J. Patten Abshire
SPECIAL TO THE WASHINGTON TIMES

The 20,000 Union soldiers killed and wounded at Shiloh in April 1862 convinced President Abraham Lincoln that the Civil War would be long and costly. That summer, he called for 600,000 new recruits.

Volunteers from Decatur, Ill., quickly organized the 115th Regiment. Farmers were the largest group of those who stepped forward, followed by teachers, clerks, merchants and shop men. Few, if any, had past militia experience, but they would be transformed from civilians into an efficient fighting force that played a key role in saving the Union army at Chickamauga in 1863.

A prime mover behind the organization of the regiment was the Rev. Jesse Hale Moore, pastor of the First Methodist Episcopal Church, who would become known as "the fighting preacher." He commanded the regiment in all its battles and at war's end was breveted from colonel to brigadier general.

Isaac H. C. Royse, author of "115th Regiment Illinois Volunteer Infantry" (published by Royse in 1900), from which this account is taken, helped organizae Company E in nearby Macon County in August 1862. He had farmed, taught school and clerked in a store. Entering Company E as a private, Royse soon rose to sergeant and in 1863 was commissioned a second lieutenant.

A short distance away in Delavan, Company H was put together. One of the first to enlist was Zeboim Cartter Patten, a school teacher who was of New England and Revolutionary stock.

The organizing and equipping of the regiment took place at Camp Butler, just east of Springfield. Drilling was a daily occupation. On Sept. 13, 1862, the regiment was mustered into U.S. service "for three years or during the war." On Oct. 4, the 115th was transported by rail to the front in Kentucky, where Gen. Braxton Bragg had led the Confederate Army of Tennessee, finally going into camp at Covington.

The Illinois volunteers saw their first signs of battle when they reached Richmond, Ky., where bullet holes

scarred trees and fences.

Sickness began to take its toll. Measles was the greatest scourge, followed by pneumonia. At one time, nearly two-thirds of the regiment was in the hospital or on the sick list in camp. The doleful funeral march was heard.

Soon the Illinois volunteers joined Maj. Gen. William S. Rosecran's army, clearing Tennessee of the Confederates. The regimental field hospitals and general hospitals in Nashville began to be filled with men suffering from typhoid and pneumonia.

Lt. Royse, lying in a hospital tent, overheard the doctors remark, "Well, of course, Royse will die. We can do nothing for him here."

Told he would be moved to the general hospital, where he would be made more comfortable he protested – he had heard of the numbers carried from the general hospital to the cemetery – and remained in the field hospital until he was able to walk out.

Winter 1863 marked the nadir of the North's military operations. The peace faction of the Democratic Party grew stronger with each setback of Union armies. War weariness and the grim realities of army life had discouraged volunteering.

The response of the Illinois volunteers to these adversities was to pass resolutions opposing any armistice and endorsing the policy "to strike decisive blows at the unholy rebellion, and to bring the war to a speedy, sure and glorious termination, so that traitors in the South may meet with deserved punishment, and damnable traitors in the North may be brought to terrible justice."

In June 1863, Rosecrans renewed his effort to expel Bragg from Tennessee. His infantry and cavalry burst through the gaps in the Cumberland foothills south of Murfreesboro.

Bragg fell back all the way to Chattanooga. The small city was strategically astride a railroad through the Appalachian mountains into the South's heartland. Soon outflanked and outnumbered, Bragg abandoned Chattanooga in September and concentrated a few miles south near LaFayette, Ga., in preparation for a counterstroke.

Feeling that Bragg was in full retreat, Rosecrans scattered his forces over a distance of 60 miles in north Georgia. The 115th Regiment marched with Rosecrans' army to Rossville, Ga., and bivouacked. On Sept. 19, Union and Confederate patrols bumped into each other west of Chickamauga Creek, igniting

Lt. Isaac H.C. Royce also was wounded at Snodgrass Hill, but he continued to command a company until the next morning.

the war's bloodiest battle in the Western theater, a battle that would fully test the 115th.

The first day's vicious struggle was inconclusive, but late the next morning, Confederate Lt. Gen. James Longstreet sent his troops moving forward.

On the Union side, confusion over orders resulted in a large gap in their line, which Longstreet's men poured through, breaking the Union army in two and sending half the troops fleeing back to Chattanooga. Union Maj. Gen. George Thomas organized the remaining troops for a last-ditch stand on a rugged series of hills known as Horseshoe Ridge or Snodgrass Hill.

The 115th Regiment had spent the night in reserve. That morning arms were inspected and 60 rounds of cartridges were issued. Gens. Gordon Granger and James Steedman ordered the division up double time to relieve Thomas on Snodgrass Ridge. The column, including the 115th, came under artillery fire near Thomas' headquarters in the Snodgrass house and then up the little valley to the northwest.

On the other side of the ridge, the Confederates were moving up the slopes to execute Bragg's plan to take

Thomas from the rear. The ridge and surrounding terrain were covered with growth and underbrush. Visibility was limited.

Royse recalled, "General Steedman, on his faithful charger directly behind the 115th, gave the signal for attack....

"It was a race for the crest of the ridge, with chances about equal. As our lines rolled over the crest, the Confederates were in plain view, in some places scarcely more than sixty yards distance. For a moment the clash of bayonets seemed inevitable, but we had the advantage. Every man presented a bright bayonet, while the Confederates were without that weapon. The men in that plight could not stand against our advancing line of steel. The intense excitement of that moment can be appreciated only by those who have had a similar experience.

"After a volley the Confederates gave way, closely followed by our front line, a distance of perhaps eighty or one hundred yards down the southern slope."

Prominent in this first charge was Cpl. Zeboim Cartter Patten. As the color guard for Company H, he was in one of the most exposed positions. A Minie ball struck him in the instep of the left foot, coming out below the ankle. He was one of the first in the company to be wounded.

Patten was evacuated to Chattanooga, where at a hospital he was told his foot would be cut off as soon as the worst cases were treated. The next morning, however, he was assured that his foot would not be amputated. Later, he was evacuated to Nashville.

More than three hours passed in this deadly combat between the Confederate and Union forces over the ridge. By 4:30 p.m., Union ammunition was running out, forcing the 115th to fall back from the crest.

Steedman galloped up to Col. Moore, "the fighting preacher," and asked why he was not holding his ground. Moore replied, "We are out of ammunition. Give us ammunition and we will hold the hill against all odds."

"Give them the bayonet," the general responded.

The colonel commanded, "Fix bayonets, forward double-quick, march," and the worn troopers of the 115th went forward. Steedman seized the regimental colors and carried them a short distance in the charge. Thus, without ammunition, the Illinois Volunteers were led in the last charge up Snodgrass Hill, driving fresh Confederate troops to the valley below.

This was the celebrated "flag incident" that Rosecran's official report records as the first charge. But Royse, who was there, places it as the last charge. On the first charge, according to Royse, company colors were carried by Patten.

When Thomas began his withdrawal, the 115th dropped back from the crest of Snodgrass Hill to evacuate to Chattanooga. A little before the last charge, Royse was wounded, but he continued to command the company until the next morning.

Brig. Gen. W. C. Whitaker, commander of the brigade, stated in his official report: "The 115th Illinois, Colonel Moore, deserves notice for its courage and bearing. The entire command bore themselves like veterans, under the most withering fire, murderous fire of musketry, grape and canister for over three hours, firmly maintaining the ground until we were directed to retire which was done in fair order, the enemy retiring also at the same time."

Recognizing the crucial role the 115th played in supporting Thomas, the "Rock of Chickamauga," in preventing destruction of the Union army, Steedman delivered his division colors to the regiment, to be carried for the day as a mark of honor.

When the Union forces later broke out of Chattanooga, the 115th under Moore operated in north Georgia as part of Maj. Gen. William T. Sherman's push to Atlanta.

Royse continued with the regiment as quartermaster. Patten, after recovering from his wound, was discharged but joined the 149th New York Infantry with the rank of lieutenant.

The 115th Regiment followed Confederate Lt. Gen. John Bell Hood into Tennessee and fought at the battle of Franklin. At the end of the war, the force mustered out at Nashville. Most of the veterans took the train back home to Decatur.

J. Patten Abshire of Alexandria was an infantryman in Europe during World War II and is a descendant of the 115th Regiment's Cpl. Zeboim Cartter Patten, who was wounded in the charge at Snodgrass Hill.

The Alexandria Chronicle is published biannually by the
Alexandria Historical Society, Inc.
Editor: Linda Greenberg

Officers of the Society are:

President: Mary Ruth Coleman — Treasurer: Anne Paul
Vice President: Bob Madison — Secretary: Linda Greenberg
Immediate Past President: James H. Johnson

The Society's mission is to promote an active interest in American history and particularly in the history of Alexandria and Virginia.

For information about Society activities please visit the Society's web site:
www.alexandriahistorical.org.

Published through the support of the J. Patten Abshire Memorial Fund.

The Alexandria Chronicle

A publication of monographs about historical Alexandria, Virginia.

ALEXANDRIA HISTORICAL SOCIETY, INC. 201 South Washington Street • Alexandria, Virginia 22314