

BRUNSWICK CIVIL WAR ROUND TABLE

MEETING – March 3 , 2021

“SIGEL & BRECKINRIDGE: LESSONS IN LEADERSHIP FROM THE BATTLE OF NEW MARKET”

SPEAKER: Sarah Kay Bierle

“If your actions inspire others to dream of more, learn more, do more and become more, you are a leader.” John Quincy Adams

Some historians and writers make hasty claims about the meaning of battles, the competency of generals, and leadership. They make their statements as if handing down the unvarnished word from on high. Sarah Kay Bierle presented a refreshing change of pace with her conclusions about leadership of Generals Franz Sigel and Breckenridge. In her honesty she admitted that their leadership qualities were those that appealed to her. Her modesty and earnestness earned our trust and her effective use of the Zoom platform our admiration.

Much fought over during the Civil War, the Shenandoah Valley drew Sigel and Breckenridge together so that Sigel could deny the Valley’s victuals and soldiers to Lee in Richmond, and Breckenridge could retain the supplies and reinforce Lee. Both men came with a history. Sigel, a German immigrant respected by the German community, came with a German military academy background, a firm belief in education, experience as a writer and recruiter who attracted many soldiers from the German-American community, and experience in numerous battles where he lost, but successfully lead orderly retreats, no small feat in the heat of battle. He could both organize units and lead them in training. Decisive decisions, not so much. He repeatedly lost encounters such as the German rebellion he fought for in Europe, the second Battle of Bull Run, Chancellorsville, and the Valley versus Stonewall Jackson.

Breckenridge, sometimes considered the heir to the beloved Stonewall Jackson in the Valley, recruited himself (he called up the 257-boy VMI Corps of Cadets), used subterfuge (at New Market, he marched the same troops across a hilltop to pretend greater strength than he had), and could make tough decisions such as committing the Corps of Cadets to charge in (of which he said, “Put in the boys and may god forgive me for the order”).

Both men could be considered political generals with Sigel owing his mantle to his recruiting ability and leadership in the German community while Breckenridge had served as the U.S. Vice President and a senator from Kentucky. Bierle found a measure of charisma in both men.

Breckenridge took his wavering line at New Market and, with the addition of the VMI cadets, managed to advance in the rain and mud to chase Sigel from the field. Sigel, instead of leading the whole army, busily spent his time arranging the individual placement of cannons. In spite of losing the battle, Sigel returned his men in an orderly retreat, crossed a swollen river and then burned the bridge denying the Confederates a rout. Nonetheless, Breckenridge could leave the Valley to reinforce Lee at Richmond.

Ms. Bierle acknowledged the imperfections of both leaders, yet each inspired her and challenges us to use history. Breckenridge teaches that we must face the odds, make informed decisions and truly commit to the contest of life. Sigel, on the other hand teaches us to seek new horizons and lands, to preserve our undying love for country even if it is adopted, and to stay organized without letting that organization trap us. Each general, however, as Adams said, inspired men to do far more than they would have done.