

BRUNSWICK CIVIL WAR ROUND TABLE

MEETING – January 5, 2021

“WRITING ABOUT NORTH CAROLINA IN THE CIVIL WAR ”

SPEAKER: Philip Gerard

Mr. Gerard when originally asked to write a monthly column for the Civil War’s anniversary for *Our State* magazine tried to gently recuse himself, suggesting other authors with stronger historical backgrounds. The *Our State* editor basically met the objections with the answer that she wanted someone “really ignorant about the Civil War.” Lest you think this damned with faint phrase, consider that the writer with no deep experience on a topic also has no deep-rooted predilections or old axes to grind. Then, too, if you write for a general public in a non-specialist magazine, the writer of lesser subject matter expertise should speak to the audience’s general needs better than the scholar. What Gerard did bring to the table, a solid history of writing fiction and journalism, armed him with the tools to do the job and maybe even us.

He decided certain things underlay most of his writing and apply specially to studying the Civil War:

- Everything he would write had to focus on North Carolina. The series would ultimately result in a book and, the tome, too, would be about ordinary people and NOT the politicians and generals of history.
- He would use the present tense throughout to give a sense of immediacy mimicking current events.
- To go with that, he wanted to use actual records to focus the work and use with his personal visits to battlefields to handle the artifacts of history.
- Focusing on individuals would help the broader story and personalize the work.

The principles of personalizing, a laser focus with the texture of reality stand any writer in good stead and carry over in the best writing. Civil War history does not have a monopoly on good communication.

In addition, NC afforded a microcosm of the war. Blockades and blockade runners surrounded Wilmington; a freedman's town on Roanoke Island not only sheltered contrabands but also recruited for the USCT; Fort Fisher offered a huge earthen fort that fell to an amphibious invasion; a POW camp in Salisbury boasted all the evils found in camps north and south; native Americans from Cherokee fought in their own battalion for the Confederacy; North Carolinians both opposed and supported secession while participating in every major battle of the war offering both deserters and devotees.

Perhaps one of the greatest charms of Mr. Gerard's Civil War writing came from the fact that his personalizing touches arose not from musty archives found in university libraries. Rather, his blessing derived directly from being a non-Civil War scholar. When he published his first column in the magazine it provoked a tide of calls from readers offering the journals and letters written by NC ancestors, records that resided in family shoeboxes and scrapbooks. These virgin history sources brought joy to both the monthly column and the book it ultimately birthed.

Over 60,000 books have been written on the American Civil War. Although Mr. Gerard spoke eloquently about his findings, his greatest gift to us emerged from a blueprint, "How to write a decent book." Maybe you would like to try your hand to be number 60,001?

By Jim Medeiros