

BRUNSWICK CIVIL WAR ROUND TABLE

MEETING – October 1, 2019

“THE INCREDIBLE DISAPPEARING MONUMENT GENERAL”

SPEAKER: Lawrence Hewitt

For a man who held the rank of lieutenant general (however temporarily), Fighting Dick Anderson boasted no great fame. In fact, Richard H. Anderson may be best known for his humility and self-effacement. Perhaps that also contributed to his problem--a man greatly valued by his commander, Robert E. Lee--yet he has not been treated well by history, according to Lawrence Hewitt, our last roundtable speaker.

Anderson's Civil War problems began even before the war. As Secretary of War for the Union, Jefferson Davis seemed to misplace Anderson's army travel allowance. (Could this also be a self-inflicted injury, Anderson being notable for his hatred of paperwork?) Once resigned from the Union Army, Anderson's path continued dogged by Davis' sluggish response to things like acting on promotion requests (Lee requested Anderson's promotion to Major General four times before the loss of another major general gave Lee the open billet for Anderson's promotion). Davis seems to have had a long memory for something about Dick Anderson.

Anderson certainly never showed the white feather and engaged in every major battle with the Army of Northern Virginia once he joined it. The roll call of battles (with their wounds) could have easily ended in his death: 2nd Manassas, Antietam, Spotsylvania, Chancellorsville, Cold Harbor, Sailors Creek, etc. Instead, they seem to just mark his disappearance. Looking at the battlefield maps of the engagements repeatedly shows locations of Confederates and Union alike, yet neither Anderson nor his command are there. You could argue that they have been erased from history, yet Anderson himself may have contributed to this cloak of invisibility. Generals must write after-engagement reports and Anderson was known for his resistance to red tape. Unfortunately for Anderson, the after-encounter report served to identify mistakes to be avoided, strategies to be repeated, and offered the base upon which history will build every war. Those reports left Anderson as the odd general out.

In addition to the possibility his own habits contributed to his poor reputation, Anderson made several enemies, didn't always enjoy good press, and even had historians who denigrated his contribution to the Confederacy. Hewitt himself admitted he held Anderson in relative contempt for forty years before discovering the truth. As he said of history in general, "A lot of what men know of the Civil War is incorrect." Perhaps his best commentary of the night came during a summary of historians on Anderson that ended with a slide of a pounce of kittens busily playing with computer tablets. (To be fair, I did not see Hewitt using any iPad.) As to the 19th century newsman, they would take any negative report by Anderson's enemies and turn it into fact, a fact as true as any other in the fog of war.

Ultimately even Lee contributed to the fading memory of General Richard Anderson. Lee watched Anderson's men gallop down the road in disarray after the Battle of Sailor's Creek on the way to Appomattox. So little of Anderson's command remained that Lee merged Anderson's Corps with the Fourth Corps, leaving Anderson nothing to lead. With that, he returned home to South Carolina to live out a life that ended with many failed jobs, obscurity, and poverty. Mr. Hewitt has done his best to bring the invisible general into the light.

Jim Medeiros