

BRUNSWICK CIVIL WAR ROUND TABLE

MEETING – October 6, 2020

“FLIGHT TO OBLIVION: ESCAPE OF CSA GOVERNMENT IN APRIL 1985”

SPEAKER: Jack Davis

Attractive myths surround the end of the Confederacy: Jefferson Davis fled Richmond so frightened that he traveled as a woman. John Breckenridge, Robert E. Lee, and Judah Benjamin plotted to overthrow Davis and surrender to the Union. The soldiers escorting the government’s evacuation plundered millions of dollars in gold. Alternatively, Jefferson Davis buried the gold in a secret treasure trove as he fled. The Confederates intentionally fired Richmond. All these *facts* come to mind when we remember war’s end. Tall tales fascinate more than the truth Jack Davis brought us the unvarnished word.

The end of Grant’s siege of Petersburg ended the Confederate capital of Richmond. By his appointment as the last Secretary of War of the Confederacy in February 1865, Breckinridge found the country had lost most of its great cities in Atlanta, Savannah, New Orleans, Norfolk, Charleston and Mobile, and nearby Wilmington. Many Confederates now sought an armistice but not surrender. With an armistice, the fighting could stop for discussion to end of hostilities. Breckinridge and his ilk wanted the rapid integration of the Confederate nation back into the Union complete with intact state and local governments. Though some advocated that the army persist as guerrillas, Confederate deserters in the hills often rode as renegades. At times the Confederates fought a two-front war with renegades in the rear and Yankees before them. Rapid reintegration assured some legitimate authorities would maintain civil order.

Jefferson Davis himself refused to concede Richmond or the war’s end. His stubborn myopia lead Breckinridge and others to change his mind through a thoroughly legal strategy: they asked General Lee for his assessment. They knew Lee thought less of victory than of some cessation of fighting, so they requested his formal report on the prosecution of the war, convinced the clear-eyed vision of the greatest general would soften Davis’ stubborn stand. Lee’s actual report said,

“With more resources we can pursue victory longer,” an unexpected equivocation. Not a cabal of traitors, the plotters still saw clearly. Breckinridge’s War Department--unlike most of the government--made careful plans for evacuation.

When Lee called for the abandonment, Davis ordered the destruction of military stores and removal of records. Being prepared, the War Department’s boxed records rode the train out of town. Many other departments resorted to piling files in the street and torching them. The destruction of military stores not only got out of hand but the people of Richmond fell to looting black market warehouses contain clothing and food they never got. Looters far outnumbered the few remaining soldiers and, with the addition of embers from burning records, the fires spread out of control. Left to burn, the city was saved by the occupying Union army .

The peripatetic Confederate government started for many new capitals including Danville, Salisbury, and Greensboro, but remained rootless. The mayor of Salisbury’s greeting presaged their pariah standing, “Welcome to Salisbury. When are you leaving?” With Federal troops all over the southeastern U.S., towns feared vengeful retribution for sheltering the rebellious government.

The long march ended In Georgia by which time their escort column of 6,000 troops melted away. The Confederate treasure went with the troops by design and not robbery. Davis divided the gold up among the men—about \$26 each. Although only Breckinridge and Judah managed to escape abroad, President Davis’ attempt to flee the camp failed. He was caught wearing a raglan — a unisex overwrap — his wife had draped over him. The raglan became his wife’s frock in reporting. Thus ended the rebellion in a forlorn hope.

By Jim Medeiros