

BRUNSWICK CIVIL WAR ROUND TABLE

How the battle for gold controlled the battlefield at next Civil War Round Table

To enter any war both sides require huge budgets to pay for weapons, ammunition, equipment, and of course, food, clothing, and supplies for the troops! When it came to the Civil War, funding was a crucial issue. On the Union side, \$73 million was available. However, the Confederates could only muster \$500,000! Despite the difference, both sides desperately needed access to America's mineral wealth to stabilize their wartime economies. The main focus was the Desert Southwest regions, especially California. To explain this rarely discussed topic, guest speaker Neal Chatelain will join us at the Tuesday, January 6th meeting of the Brunswick Civil War Round Table. His captivating presentation is entitled, "Treasure and Empire in the Civil War: The Panama Route, the West, and the Campaigns to Control America's Mineral Wealth."

So, what does the Panama Route have to do with the Civil War? Everything! The conflict extended beyond traditional battlefields to the American West and the high seas. Beginning with California's gold deposits, which were in abundance about that time, played a key role in financing the Civil War. For the Union, the question was how to get extracted gold safely from



California all the way to New York. The route stretched from San Francisco to Panama City. From there a relatively brief Panama Railroad journey across the narrow isthmus (no Panama Canal yet!) to the Atlantic port of Colon. Finally, the ships of Cornelius Vanderbilt's steamship company carried the gold to the port of New York.

The Confederate government attempted to stake its own claims to this "gold rush." Confederate armies advanced to seize the West and its gold and silver reserves, while their warships steamed to intercept the Union's Panama Route ships. Their desire was to intercept U.S. treasure ships which could carry up to \$1.5 million in gold during a single voyage. The Confederate Navy Department's plan in part employed the use of commerce raiders, privateers, and small clandestine groups



who would book passage on enemy vessels and attempt to seize them from within. However, these “pirates” never captured a single gold-laden prize ship! Even with those problems and shortcomings, the route and convoy system was credited as having been a “cost-effective” measure to ensure the Panama Route ships

safely completed their voyages. So, between April 1861 and June 1865 nearly \$171 million (almost \$6 billion in today’s dollars) in bullion was transported safely. As an aside, capturing ships carrying gold from California could have doubled the Confederacy’s treasury at any given point in time. It never happened.

In a broader sense, just the mere presence of the convoys and their support facilities enhanced U.S./Caribbean relations, helped enforce the Monroe Doctrine during a troubling period of international conflict, and raised the stature and visibility of the United States as a premier hemispheric power. While all this was going on, Civil War battles continued, in large part due to California’s gold funding!

Neil Chatelain is a professor, historian, teacher, and author who specializes in researching, writing, and speaking on naval operations of the Civil War. He spent nine years as a U.S. Navy Surface Warfare Officer, both on active duty and in the Navy Reserve. He is an associate professor of history at Lone State College – North Harris, in the greater Houston area, and is the vice president and editorial board chair for the non-profit Emerging Civil War. A prolific author, Neil has written scores of articles in journals, magazines, books, and online forums, and speaks at dozens of conferences, museums, podcasts, and Civil War round tables.



This will be the first meeting of the New Year, and will take place on Tuesday, January 6th at Hatch Auditorium on Caswell Beach. Registration begins at 6:15PM. The program starts at 7:00PM. The visitor fee is still only \$10, and may be applied toward the \$25 annual membership dues, which importantly can include a spouse. Incidentally, about one-third of our audiences are female!

For more information about the meeting or the Round Table, please contact president John Butler at Brunswickcwr@gmail.com, or call him directly at (404) 229-9425. Or, visit their website at Brunswickcivilwarroundtable.com for background and current information, news, and updates, or their Facebook page.