

HISTORY OF THE HARRISBURG CIVIL WAR ROUND TABLE

As the capital of Pennsylvania, the “Keystone State,” Harrisburg played a central role in the Civil War. A critical junction for several railroads, it was home to Camp Curtin, the largest Union Army training camp, and was a tempting target for the Army of Northern Virginia when it invaded the north. Confederate forces came within a few miles of Harrisburg in late June of 1863, before they were forced to turn back and concentrate on the town of Gettysburg. Today, Harrisburg is home to the National Civil War Museum and one of the most celebrated Civil War Round Tables in the nation.

Founded in 1959 during a period of intense interest as the centennial of the Civil War approached, the Harrisburg CWRT has long provided a congenial medium through which its members have broadened their knowledge of that conflict. Its founders were ardent preservationists and charter members of the Gettysburg Battlefield Preservation Association; approximately 20% of the current Gettysburg National Military Park was purchased through their fundraising efforts. Preservation remains an important part of our mission. Many members are also avid collectors of Civil War artifacts.



THE HARRISBURG CWRT'S FIRST PRESIDENT, JOHN J. COBAUGH, PRESENTING A GETTYSBURG BATTLEFIELD PRESERVATION ASSOCIATION MEDAL TO PRESIDENT DWIGHT D. EISENHOWER IN 1963.

The Harrisburg CWRT's membership is open to all who have an interest in the Civil War, whether novice or enthusiast, without regard to race, creed, or gender. Over the years our membership has included a large number of Civil War historians, including General Edward J. Stackpole, Robert H. Fowler, and Cooper H. Wingert, to name just a few. A lecture each May honors two of the Round Table's most prolific authors and biggest supporters, Colonel Wilbur S. Nye and Dr. Richard J. Sommers. The Round Table invites prominent authors and scholars from all over the nation to address its monthly meetings, and at least once a year encourages one of our members to speak.

Every five years the Round Table plans a special anniversary celebration. Recent anniversary speakers have included James I. Robertson, Jr., Russell F. Weigley, Charles P. Roland, Edwin C. Bearss, James M. McPherson, Peter S. Carmichael, and William C. “Jack” Davis, a Harrisburg CWRT past president and lifetime member.

The Round Table’s monthly meetings begin with an hour of refreshments, informal conversation, and a chance to purchase book raffle tickets, followed by dinner, announcements, and the featured speaker. One of the traditions that sets the Harrisburg Round Table apart is the “square table” session that follows, in which the speaker and some of the more passionate and indefatigable history lovers in the group continue the Q&A session well into the night.

In conjunction with our colleagues from the Hershey Civil War Round Table, we conduct two field trips a year, one in the spring and one in the fall. These field trips are very popular and often sell out weeks or months in advance. Recent trips took us to the Cavalry Battlefields of Gettysburg, the Seven Days Battlefields around Richmond, the Shenandoah Valley Campaign of 1864, Lee’s Retreat from Gettysburg, the Battle of Monocacy and the National Museum of Civil War Medicine in Frederick, Harpers Ferry, and the Battle of the Wilderness. World-class tour guides like Dennis Frye and Chris Mackowski have stimulated even more interest in our organization.

The Harrisburg CWRT publishes a monthly newsletter, “The Dispatch,” is on Facebook, and maintains a web presence. For more information on our organization and a list of upcoming speakers, go to: www.harrisburgcwrt.org Better yet, attend one of our meetings and experience the traditions that make the Harrisburg CWRT unique.

Note: Like CWRTs all over the nation, the Harrisburg Round Table has had to adapt to the challenges posed by the coronavirus pandemic, and hold its monthly meetings virtually using Zoom. Its board of directors is determined to keep the organization going while taking prudent steps to protect the health of its members. We look forward to the day when it will be possible to resume having live meetings at the Radisson hotel in Camp Hill and continue our field trips.

