

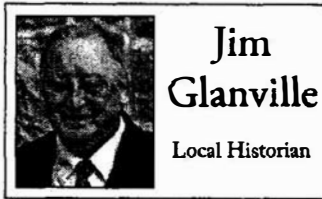
The Civil War skirmish at Pearisburg

A few weeks ago this columnist attended Dr. Brent Tarter's lecture about the events of the year 1619 at a meeting of the Historical Society of Western Virginia held at the Lutheran Church in the Raleigh Court section of Roanoke.

A fine and coherent speaker, Tarter gave a clear and crisp view of the conventional history of 1619. That history has been heavily promoted this year by the state-funded organization Evolution Virginia.

As described in the "Local Historian" column of July 31, 2019, this columnist sharply differs from the conventional view. He regards Evolution Virginia's description of the 1619 events as not being "pivotal and significant" in the history of America, rather he asserts that the Evolution Virginia campaign amounts to little more than a high-priced, taxpayer-sponsored publicity campaign for the Jamestown-Williamsburg-Yorktown region of Tidewater.

After the lecture this columnist was approached by George "Al" McLean, Jr., and engaged in a pleasant, friendly conversation. McLean is a well-known Roanoke



attorney, a longtime member of the Roanoke Bar Association, one of its former presidents, an avid historian, and a member of the Board of the Historical Society of Western Virginia. McLean grew up in a home in Pearisburg in Giles County overlooking the site of the skirmish there.

McLean wrote an introduction to the 2011 book "Edward Beyer's Travels Through America: An Artist's View" published by the Historical Society of Western Virginia, a copy of which is in the columnist's library. He also wrote the 2012 book "Skirmish at Pearisburg" of which this columnist had not previously heard.

A few days ago, a copy of "Skirmish at Pearisburg" sent by McLean unexpectedly arrived in my mail box, prompting this column.

The blurb on the back cover

of McLean's book reads: "By the spring of 1862, Union forces controlled almost all of what was to become the state of West Virginia. One of the most remarkable regiments of the Civil War [the 23rd Ohio Volunteer Infantry] that included two future presidents would move south and occupy the village of Pearisburg, Virginia. This placed the Federals with 20 miles of a vital southern rail link. Although the Battle of Pearisburg was small by Civil War standards, it reflected much of what was happening in the larger war."

The skirmish took place at Pearisburg the seat of Giles County on May 6, 1862, when Union troops under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Rutherford B. Hayes arrived from Princeton, in today's West Virginia, took the town quickly, and captured several Confederates and a large quantity of Confederate commissary supplies.

The future presidents were Hayes and the younger William McKinley, who was his commissary sergeant. Confederate forces, led by Brigadier

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dier General Henry Heth, soon drove the Federal invaders out of Pearisburg and over the course of the next few days back to Narrows. The Confederates had the advantage of outnumbering the Federals 3-to-1. Author McLean writes that the skirmish is best described as a rear guard action, fought through a large part of Giles County. A total of only one or two fatalities were reported from both sides as a consequence of the skirmish.

The Civil War in southwest Virginia was largely focused on the Virginia and Tennessee Railroad that ran from Bristol to Lynchburg via Radford and Christiansburg. At that time Radford was called Central Depot, being the depot halfway between Bristol and Lynchburg. Control of this railroad was absolutely critical for the Confederacy as it linked Virginia and Richmond to the other confederate states of the Deep South.

The Virginia and Tennessee Railroad was finally temporarily severed two years later in the summer of 1864 in the wake of the Battle of Cloyd's Mountain, fought in Pulaski County. Both future presidents also fought at Cloyd's Mountain. According to the web site of Virginia Tech's Center for Studies of the Civil War, the fierce fighting at Cloyd's Mountain lasted only for an hour before devolving into brutal hand-to-hand combat in a battle of deadly intensity that exceeded all other Civil War fights. A fire that later broke out on the battlefield proved lethal to many wounded soldiers. Combined casualties of over 1,200 were high for the relatively low number of troops engaged and the short duration of the battle.

George Kegley reviewed "Skirmish at Pearisburg" for the "Roanoke Times" in 2012. He wrote "This is a well-written account of one of the hundreds of conflicts during a time of great tension across the nation." This columnist

would add that the book is exceedingly well-referenced and well-illustrated and is an excellent example of a useful and worthwhile local history volume. It can be purchased on Amazon.

In addition to his writing, McLean can be viewed in-person at Youtube speaking in 2012 about the skirmish at Pearisburg to the Giles County Historical Society. See the link at <http://tinyurl.com/PearisburgSkirmish>.

McLean in his preface writes "I have been stunned by the amount of historical materials on the internet such as Hayes' diaries and letters." As this columnist can abundantly attest, the ready online availability of primary historical documents is a grand upside of the Internet. Of course, there is corresponding ugly dark downside exemplified by the vast amount of highly popular nonsense to be found on social media that reaches vast numbers of readers via click baiting. We live these days in a complicated online world.

Finally, note two recent history news items relevant to our local area. As reported on the front page of this newspaper, the prominent Virginia Civil War historian James "Bud" Robertson who taught at Virginia Tech for many years died aged 88 in late October. Also, the local history book "The Drama of Blacksburg" was just published by Hugh Campbell. Campbell is a many-year Blacksburg resident, a retired math professor, and former editor of the "Smithfield Review."

Several former "Local Historian" columns have discussed Bud Robertson. A future column will review "The Drama of Blacksburg."

Jim Glanville is a retired chemist living in Blacksburg. He has been publishing and lecturing for more than a decade about the history of southwest Virginia. He can be reached at jglanvil@blacksburg.net.

Click below here to see Al McClean's lecture:

<http://tinyurl.com/PearisburgSkirmish>