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Michigan Regimental Round Table Newsletter—Page 1

April 2025

MEMBER RENEWAL

The MRRT celebrates its 65th year in 2025 – and now is a wonderful time to show your support by renewing your membership! (Or become a new member!). Membership is \$25 a year – or \$5 for students. Checks should be made out to Treasurer Jeanie Graham (the bank does not like checks made out to the RoundTable) and can be mailed to her home at 29835 Northbrook, Farmington Hills, MI 48334-2326. Cash is always welcome at our meetings.

Our April meeting will be on Monday, April 28, 2025, at 6:30 pm in the lower level of the Farmington Library – corner of Grand River and Farmington Road. Our guest speaker, Ron Kirkwood, will begin around 7:00 pm after our 6:30 pm business meeting. We must leave the library by 8:45 pm.

The Roundtable has a great website, created by our friend, Gerald Furi. We are no longer connected to the Farmington Library. The website is: <https://www.mrrt.us> Please note that the s after http is necessary to get on the website. The website is well worth visiting.

APRIL'S SPEAKER – RON KIRKWOOD – “TELL MOTHER NOT TO WORRY”

The Roundtable is happy to introduce our April speaker, Ron Kirkwood, who will speak on “Tell Mother Not to Worry.” This is Ron’s second book resulting from his eight years of research on the George Spangler farm in Gettysburg.

His first book was “Too Much for Human Endurance: The George Spangler Farm Hospitals and the Battle of Gettysburg (2019)”. Copies of his book will be available for purchase.

Ron enjoys a Michigan background. He is a native of Dowagiac/Sister Laker and is a graduate of Central Michigan. Ron is now retired from a 40-year career in newspapers. He worked for the *Midland Daily News*. He managed the Harrisburg (PA) copy desk when the newspaper won a Pulitzer Prize in 2012.

This will be a great presentation!

GETTYSBURG TRIP!

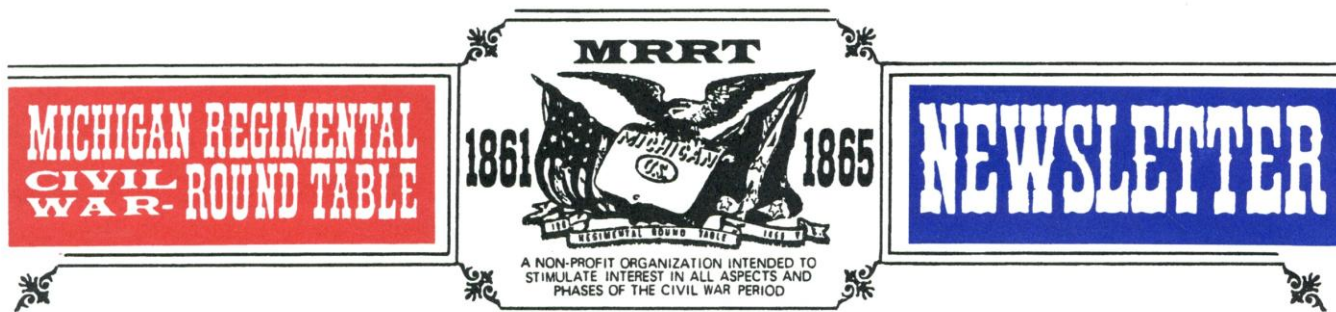
The Roundtable will be visiting the Gettysburg Battlefield on Saturday and Sunday, November 1st and 2nd, 2025.

Linda Gerhardt has done a wonderful job putting our trip together. **As of April 13th, 24 people have signed up!** Our guide will be Chris Army (last name). He was our terrific guide, along with Clark “Bud” Hall. for the Culpepper and Brandy Station trip. He successfully passed the Gettysburg guide test, discussed in our January 2025 newsletter.

GETTYSBURG HOTEL

We have reserved a block of rooms at the Quality Inn Battlefield, 380 Steinwehr Avenue, Gettysburg, that our President, George Crouch, recommended. The Inn is right on the Battlefield, in view of President Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address monument. **The telephone number is 717.913.4923.** Prices are \$170 each for Friday and Saturday. Sunday night is \$80. This includes breakfast. The rooms are reserved under the Michigan Regimental Roundtable MRRT, held until October 1, 2025.

The Inn includes the Reliance Mine Saloon where many historians gather. William Frassanito, Garry Adelman, and Tim Smith are regular visitors.



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GETTYSBURG TOUR COST

The tour costs \$275 per person (for twenty-four participants):

- The Tour guide fee and tip.
- Motor coach transportation around the Gettysburg area.
- Gettysburg Visitor Center Movie, Cyclorama, and Museum Entry.
- Box lunches are on Saturday and Sunday. Saturday evening buffet at the 1776 Dobbin House Tavern. The menu includes a 25-item salad bar, fresh bread, three main entrees, four vegetables, four desserts, and a selection of coffee, tea, and iced tea.

If our participation increases, the individual Tour Cost will decline.

ITINERARY

The itinerary is being finalized. The sites included are General Meade's Headquarters, Culp's Hill Observation Tower, Michigan Cavalry Brigade Monument, and Gettysburg National Military Park Museum & Visitor's Center.

SIGN UP

Sign up for the tour at a MRRT meeting or contact Linda Gerhardt (586.588.2712, lindagerhardt99@gmail.com).

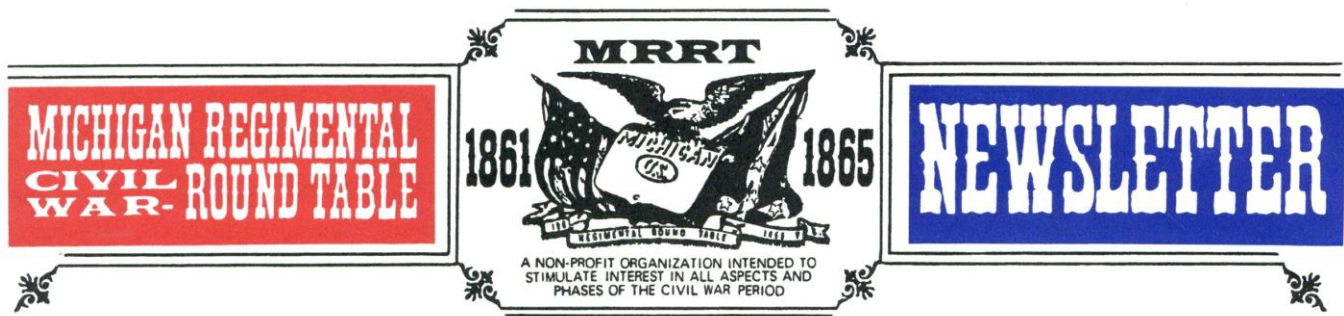
Please note that each participant is responsible for his/her travel to and from Gettysburg.

MARCH 2025 PRESENTATION – CLAIRE HERHOLD “GLORY, COLONEL SHAW AND THE 54TH MASSACHUSETTS INFANTRY”

The MRRT thoroughly enjoyed Claire Herhold's insightful presentation of “Glory, Colonel Shaw and the 54th Massachusetts Infantry”. The research she did for this talk arose from her undergraduate studies at Saginaw Valley State.

The story of the 54th and its leader were dramatized in the 1989 movie, “Glory”. The 54th Massachusetts was the first all-Black regiment in the Union army. **Although unsuccessful, its courageous attack on the Confederate fortification, Ft. Wagner, led to northern acceptance that Black men could be made into effective soldiers.** As a result, about 200,000 men of color bolstered the Union army during the war. Prior to the actions of the 54th, the popular white view was that Black men were both naturally violent but (somehow!) weak and effeminate at the same time!

Although a Massachusetts regiment, the 54th contained Black enlisted men from many states including sixty-five from Michigan. Most of these were present at the attack of Ft. Wagner in 1863 where one died and ten were wounded. Detroit was the hometown for the largest number of Michigan recruits in the 54th. Although the movie implied that many of the regiment's Black soldiers were former slaves, this was not true. All the commissioned officers were white. **Claire focused much of her discussion on the young commander, Colonel Robert G. Shaw, including his background and apparent motivations.** Despite being in command for only 5 months, he was an appealing figure to others, both the white officers and Black soldiers of the 54th. After his death, several of his officers wrote to his parents praising his soldierly qualities. **His sympathy for his men led him to protest their poor treatment by the military** including complaining about their inferior weapons and uniforms and lower pay – the last via a “pay boycott” where the men refused their pay for months in protest. He also sought a combat role for the 54th to validate them as real soldiers, not



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just military laborers as many Black people were employed. He did insist on enforcing strict discipline to refute the common misconception that Black people were lazy and lacking in character.

Shaw was offered the colonelcy of the 54th by Massachusetts Governor John Andrews who sought a candidate with strong anti-slavery credentials. Shaw had served initially with a New York volunteer regiment then with the 2nd Massachusetts where he had seen some combat. **He initially rejected the offer.** Shaw was concerned about the notoriety of commanding Black troops; he had just proposed to Anna Haggerty so it is possible he feared that she might be snubbed by Boston society since even many anti-slavery northerners harbored racial prejudices.



So why did he subsequently change his mind and accept? Claire does not agree with the notion that Shaw was a risk taker. The pattern of his youth suggests he was not. He was a poor student at Harvard and eventually dropped out before graduating. The reason may have had to do with his complex relationship with his strong-willed mother, Sarah. He had enjoyed the freedom away from her during his time as a student in Europe. **Claire believes he harbored self-doubts and may have decided to take on this challenging role to prove himself.** She suggests a parallel between his self-image and those of his Black soldiers who wanted to prove themselves as men by combat.

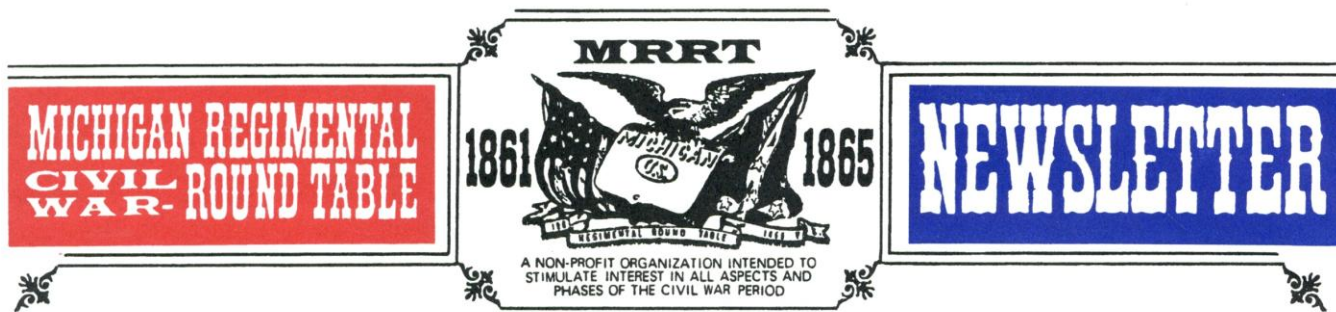
The July 18, 1863, attack on Fort Wagner was doomed to failure from the start and Shaw and most of his men knew it – the defenses were too strong. **Shaw understood he would die trying.** He led the assault, and legend says was the first to reach the parapet but he and many of his men died there. **He was buried in a mass grave with his men by the Confederate defenders.** After the fort was eventually abandoned by the rebels, the Union commander wrote Shaw's parents asking if they wished his remains to be sent to them for reburial in Boston. **Their response was that they wanted him to remain forever with his men.** Today most of Morris Island has been lost to the rising sea and the original grave site of the 54th Massachusetts dead is sadly lost underwater.

We want to thank Claire Herhold for her erudite and enjoyable presentation. We plan to invite her back; her presentation received several favorable comments from the audience.

Civil War Essentials - Civil War "Terror Weapon"

In our dangerous world, many countries and organizations have used deadly devices disguised as (or hidden inside) innocent objects – the Soviets even dropped explosive devices which looked like children's toys near insurgent villages during their occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s. This brutal, and some would say criminal, tactic also occurred during the Civil War. **One such object was the "Courtney Torpedo."**

In April 1862, the Confederate Congress promised any inventor of a *"new machine or engine, ... or any new method"* which would destroy enemy ships would get one-half of the value of the destroyed vessel as a reward. **One of those who responded to this request was Thomas E. Courtney, an Irish emigrant.**



He conceived of an explosive device disguised as an ordinary lump of coal which could be secretly mixed in with real coal in an enemy fuel supply pile and then unknowingly loaded on board a Yankee steamboat or steam engine tender. Unlike other explosive devices in the Civil War era, it would not rely on fuses which were crude and sometimes unreliable. Instead, the heat of the fire it was thrown into would cause it to explode. It could destroy the furnace and boiler at least, and perhaps the ship as well. **It also had the major advantage of allowing the saboteur to be long gone before the explosion.**



In November 1863, Courtney traveled to Richmond to try to interest the Confederate government in his idea which he called a “coal shell.” **He had prepared a model (photo left) which he showed to President Davis, who was impressed, and Secretary of War Sedden who was skeptical.** Approval was given provided it passed tests at City Point, Virginia, in January 1864 which were successful. The CSA Congress had appropriated \$5 million for secret service activity. Funds were allocated to manufacture these bombs and to support agents in infiltrating Union supply areas, where they concealed them in coal dumps.

The torpedoes (all such explosive devices were called torpedoes during the Civil War) were manufactured at the 7th Avenue Artillery Shop near the Tredegar Iron Works in Richmond. **The thin cast iron shell, shaped exactly like a lump of coal, was filled with about 4 oz. of gunpowder, closed with a plug, then dipped in hot beeswax and rolled in real coal dust to complete the disguise.**

Almost immediately, the Union authorities got wind of this new “infernal machine.” A former employee of the 7th Avenue Artillery Shop made a voluntary statement regarding them. Soon after, a letter written by Courtney containing details of the torpedoes was found in the possession of a rebel courier intercepted by a Navy gunboat on the Mississippi. Admiral David Porter immediately issued an order that all coal dumps and barges were to be guarded.



The exact number of Union vessels damaged or sunk by the Courtney Torpedo is not known as many Confederate records were burned at war’s end. **The Greyhound, Ben Butler’s headquarters steamboat, and the new gunboat USS Chenango were victims.** Ironically, the *Chenango* (which Courtney specifically claimed) did not sink although many of its crew were killed – this meant Courtney was not eligible for the payment promised by the CSA government since the ship was not actually destroyed! **Certainly, other Yankee boats lost to explosions assumed to be from burst boilers might well have been from the Courtney device.** It is possible that the tragic loss of the *Sultana* on the Mississippi in April 1865 might have been from one although most historians have rejected the theory. It is even possible that vessels lost on the Great Lakes may have been victims of the coal bomb since rebel operatives based in Toronto were known to possess them.

After the war, Courtney (picture above) tried to interest various European governments in his device but got no bites and found that others were copying his idea. **A coal bomb was featured in an 1881 short story by Arthur Conan Doyle.** It has even been suggested that the massive explosion on the “Black Tom” pier in New York harbor in July 1916 was caused by a similar device planted by German operatives to disrupt the flow of American war material to Britain during WWI.