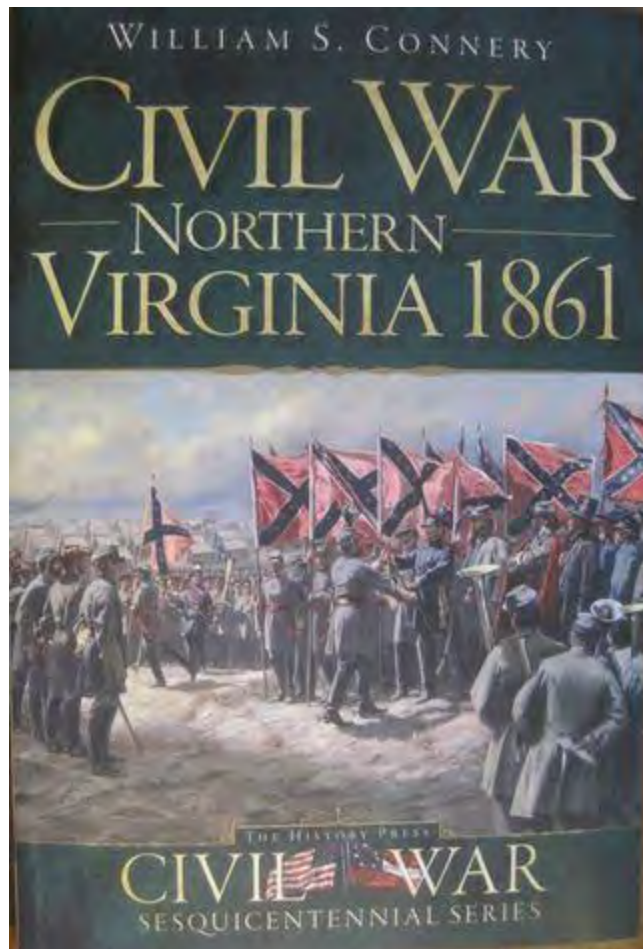


Jaybird's Jottings

New Book on the Civil War in Northern Virginia by William S. Connery

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With less than a month to go, the year 2011 is slipping away. For Civil War history buffs, this means so too are the sesquicentennial look backs for the first year of the War Between the States.

Procrastinators in this regard need not to worry. Leading the rescue mission is William Connery, whose new book, published by The History Press, is titled “Civil War, Northern Virginia, 1861.”

Connery, a native of Baltimore and resident of Fairfax County since 1989, brings much expertise to the table. The front page of the September 2011 issue of *The Civil War Courier* features a pair of his pieces on the commemoration and re-enactment of the “First Battle of Manassas/Bull Run” this past summer. He is an active member of several Civil War history organizations, speaks on American history topics, and gives guided tours in his beloved home city.

Like many others with an avid interest in the topic, Connery is passionate about understanding the battles that claimed over 600,000 souls and injured many more. I sat down with him yesterday at a coffee house on Richmond Highway, located about a mile south from the site of Fort Lyon (Huntington Metro) where Union soldiers camped and kept a watchful eye on the southern approaches to Alexandria.

Holding a copy of his book in his hand, the author looks as proud as a new father. He tells me about the image on the front cover, a painting (“First Battle Flags”) by Don Troiani, whose realistic portrayals of the war have earned him accolades and high regard among historians and re-enactors. Depicted is the presentation of these battle flags to the Confederate troops at Centreville on November 28, 1861.

Pointing out the lack of uniformity of the red colors, Connery explained why. During the First Battle of Manassas that summer, soldiers found it difficult to distinguish between the Stars and Stripes and the Stars and Bars. The Cary Sisters of Baltimore and Alexandria were tasked with sewing to come up with battle flags. The supply of red silk in Richmond had to be supplemented with red-like colors.

We also talked about the “Marshall House Incident” that took place at the corner of S. Pitt and King Street (now the Monaco Hotel) in Old Town Alexandria on May 24, 1861. The City commemorated the event this past summer, so there’s more knowledge now of the killing there of Colonel Ellsworth and James W. Jackson, the war’s first two martyrs.



In the Introduction to his book, Connery writes about The “Occoquan Flag Incident,” one that demonstrated the increasing tensions between south and north, and in some ways, foreshadowed the Marshall House killings.

Today, this charming town about 15 miles south of Washington whose leafy hills overlook the Occoquan River, is as peaceful a place as you will find. 150 years ago, anger burned when Lincoln supporters, who were few and far between south of Washington, displayed a banner in support of Lincoln and Hannibal Hamlin in their campaign bid for the Presidency.

Three weeks later, the Prince William County Militia from Brentsville arrived at the Rockledge property and surrounded the flagpole. Given the signal, Jackson, who is immortalized with a commemorative marker at the southeast corner of S. Royal and King Street, walked up to the flag pole with axe in hand and took the first cut. Minutes later the troops marched out of town with the U.S. flag, the Lincoln campaign banner and the splintered remains of the pole.

“Somewhat ironic,” Connery said, given what happened at the Marshall House. Colonel Ellsworth and his men had made Jackson livid by taking down a Confederate flag he proudly flew on top of the hotel.

The book’s ten chapters can’t cover everything that took place in the region in 1861, but residents of places like Mount Vernon, Falls Church, Woodlawn, Fairfax City, Dranesville, Leesburg and others will enjoy reading about the action in their neck of the woods. For those already familiar with the topic, little nuggets of info and insights are to be found.

My only criticism of the book is its publication date of November 23rd. But this is not the author’s fault. History Press contacted him in February. I told Connery in light of that late date, he did a great job given that pressure of time.

At one point in the interview, Connery shows me one of the preview pages in his book. He chose one of the stanzas from the “Star Spangled Banner.” His credit line says, “Written by a Georgetown lawyer in Baltimore Harbor, 1814.”

He then asked me if I know who the lawyer is.

I wanted to tell him about my recent Key pursuits, but for the sake of time, I just said, “Francis Scott Key.”

After he nodded, I asked him why he puts it that way, and didn’t use Key’s name.

“I want people to think.”

Don’t worry. Connery’s book is not a test. It’s a well-researched collection of stories with photos that, in their own way, provide some understanding of what took place in the war’s first year in Northern Virginia.

So if you want this book, don’t delay. The second battle at Manassas and the war’s bloody second year are not that far away.