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**Des Moines
Civil War
Roundtable**

**November 2026
Headquarters District Iowa
General Order No. 505**

- The **Third meeting** of the Fall campaign will **November 5** at the **The Machine Shed**
- The bar will open at 5:30 with the meal served at 6:30.
- Our program *John Pregler (Dubuque/SUVCW) William Vandever: Iowa's Congressman-Colonel*
- Meal choices **Pork Loin and Roasted Turkey Breast** at **\$26.00**
- **Reservations & payment** will be accepted until **November 2**.
By command of Brigadier General Gordon McKenzie

Our web address www.dmcivilwar.com

Ronald R Nurmi
Colonel & Adjutant
email- dmcwrt@gmail.com
1424 E Walnut St #4 DM 50316

We have a price increase for the meal to **\$26.00.**

It is time for many to renew your membership the dues are the same this year

\$30.00 for Newsletter via PDF

\$35.00 for Newsletter via USPS

\$40.00 for families

If you have any question please contact me at dmcwrt@gmail.com or 515-491-3626

According to my records the following members had not renewed their membership for the 2025-2026 campaign. If this is incorrect please contact me for the correction.

Brown Ed
King Peter
Sherman Bill

Fletcher Jonathan
McDougell Sarah

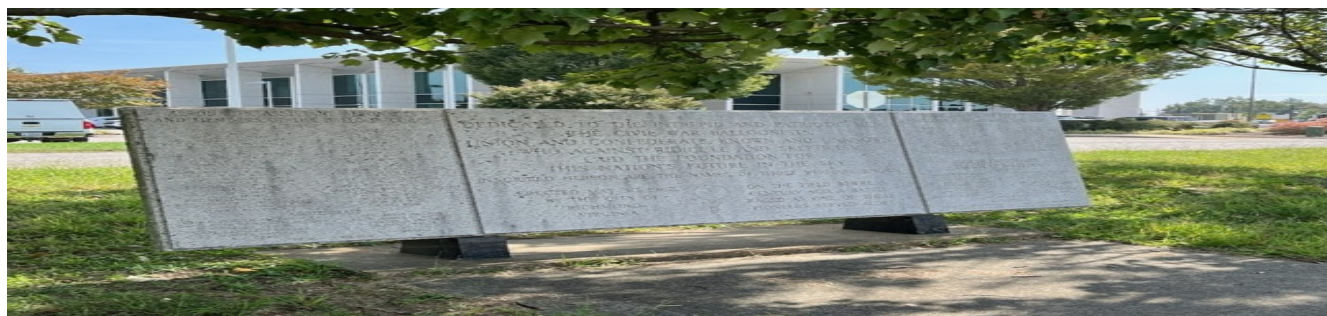
Hanson Larry
Miller Ben

Hickman, Rick
Scott Steve

Known and Unknown: Civil War Balloonists and their Forgotten Monument



By **ECW Guest Post** on October 16, 2025



ECW welcomes guest author Eric Atkisson.

On May 31, 1962, a crowd that included schoolchildren, teachers, the mayor, and several out-of-town guests gathered at the Richmond, Virginia airport to unveil a new monument. Emplaced by the city the previous day, the gray, horizontal 4 x 12 marble slab was revealed with much fanfare on the battle of Seven Pines centennial, though it neither exalted Gen. Robert E. Lee, who took command of the Army of Northern Virginia during the battle, nor celebrated the Army of the Potomac's subsequent withdrawal from the very gates of Richmond.

The monument was instead a tribute to the "Civil War balloonists, Union and Confederate, known and unknown, who against ridicule and skepticism laid the foundation for this nation's future in the sky." Listing the names of 48 Union men and 13 Confederates who served as aeronauts, assistant aeronauts,

or members of their respective army's balloon corps—as well as those who made ascensions in the balloons or encouraged their use—the inscription further noted that the monument was erected “On the field where a century ago, a battle raged as one of these pioneers served aloft.”



NEW MONUMENT AT BYRD FIELD IS A REMINDER OF THE PIONEERING FLIGHTS OF AIRMEN DURING CIVIL WAR
Among Those Who Took Part in the Dedication Yesterday Was Miss Jackie Allen (left), Civil War Centennial Queen

The Civil War Balloonists Monument on May 31, 1962.

(The *Richmond News Leader*)

While the battle of Seven Pines, or Fair Oaks as it was soon known in the North, was indeed fought on much of the same ground now occupied by the Richmond airport and surrounding community of Sandston, the aerial pioneer serving aloft on the day of battle was about 11 miles north and hundreds of feet in the air, keenly observing Rebel troop movements through his telescope.

“On the 31st of May, at noon, I ascended at Mechanicsville, and discovered bodies of the enemy and trains of wagons moving from Richmond toward Fair Oaks,” wrote Professor Thaddeus S. C. Lowe, the Union Army Balloon Corps “Chief of Aeronautics,” as he signed his reports. “I remained in the air watching their movements until nearly 2 o’clock, when I saw the enemy form in line of battle, and cannonading immediately commenced.”^[1] Lowe promptly dispatched an assistant with details of his observations to Maj. Gen. George McClellan and followed up with several written dispatches after returning to the army camp at the Gaines Farm.

Matthew Brady, “Professor Lowe’s military balloon near Gaines’ Farm, Virginia,”



The famous photo of the Intrepid being inflated at the Gaines farm. Two of Lowe's gas generators can be seen in the left of this photo. Later captured during the Confederate advance at Gaines' Farm, generator Number 11 would be put on display in Richmond as a war trophy. Photograph. (Library of Congress)

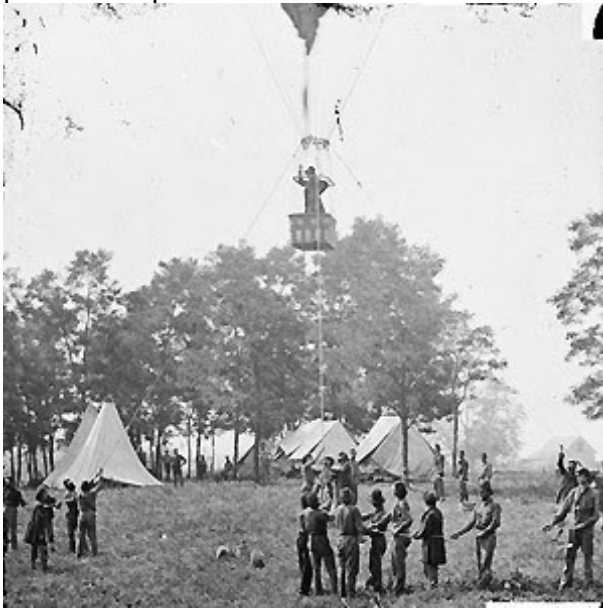
McClellan, in response, ordered Maj. Gen. Edwin Sumner to hasten construction of a bridge across the Chickahominy and to march II Corps across as quickly as possible, in support of Maj. Gen. Samuel Heintzelman's beleaguered III Corps. While these movements were completed just in time and the battle itself was a tactical draw, the Seven Days battles continued and McClellan ultimately withdrew the army to Harrison's Landing.

In the final, official report of his service as commander of the Army of the Potomac, he fulsomely credited "Professor Lowe, the intelligent and enterprising aeronaut," writing, "I was greatly indebted for the valuable information obtained during his ascensions."

"From my own observation and experience," Heintzelman later wrote to Lowe, "I would consider your balloons indispensable to an army in the field, and should I ever be entrusted with such a command I would consider my preparations incomplete without one or more balloons."

“At all times we were fully aware that you Federals were using balloons to examine our positions,” Lt. Gen. James Longstreet wrote to Lowe years later, “and we watched with envious eyes their beautiful observations as they floated high in the air.” Longstreet lamented the Confederacy’s own short-lived experiment with observation balloons, writing years later for *Century Magazine*, “We longed for the balloons that poverty denied us” and telling a fanciful story about a balloon stitched together from “all the silk dresses in the Confederacy.”

The balloon in question, the *Gazelle*, was not in fact made of actual dresses, but of multicolored silk normally used for dresses, and manufactured at private expense in Savannah, Georgia.^[6] Captured on July 4, 1862, the *Gazelle* was one of only two Confederate balloons launched during the war under the command of Capt. John Randolph Bryan, who unlike Lowe and his Northern colleagues had no previous experience as a balloonist.



Lowe prepares to observe the battle from his balloon Excelsior. Fair Oaks,

Virginia May 1862. (Library of Congress)

Lowe himself resigned a year later, after the battle of Chancellorsville. Still suffering the lingering effects of malaria contracted on the Peninsula, he had quarrelled with army and government bureaucracy, ambitious rivals in the Balloon Corps, and his newest army superior, who cut the balloonists’ pay and demanded that Lowe’s father, an assistant aeronaut, be discharged from the service. The Balloon Corps continued for a few months without Lowe, but was officially disbanded in August 1863, much to the Rebel army’s relief.

“I have never understood why the enemy abandoned the use of military balloons,” wrote Col. E. P. Alexander, who had ascended in the *Gazelle* with Bryan only days before the balloon’s capture. “Even if the observers never saw anything they would have been worth all they cost for the annoyance and

delays they caused us in trying to keep our movements out of their sight.”

While Lowe was recovering at home, he was visited by a young engineer officer of the Württembergian army named Ferdinand Graf von Zeppelin. Inspired by what he had seen as a Union army observer in 1863, Zeppelin consulted with Lowe at length on his experiences and knowledge of balloons.

Years later, as a German general and inventor of rigid airships, he credited his observations in the American Civil War as the origin of his inspiration for dirigibles. During the First World War, German “Zeppelins” drifted in the skies over England on reconnaissance and bombing runs, while hundreds of tethered observation balloons rose along both sides of the Western Front in Belgium and France. More recently, unmanned tethered balloons called aerostats have provided critical surveillance and security for American and allied military forces in places like Iraq and Afghanistan.

The balloonists of the American Civil War were ahead of their time. They hadn’t just “laid the foundation for this nation’s future in the sky” as the Richmond monument rightly claims; they had laid the world’s as well. Lowe himself, a prolific inventor with 18 U.S. patents to his name, is credited with designing the first portable gas generators for balloons and the first aircraft carriers—used to good effect during the Peninsula Campaign—as well as the first-ever use of telegraphs from the air and novel improvements to the altimeter, aerial mapping techniques, and the balloons themselves. All had a lasting impact in the field of military aviation.

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