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**Des Moines
Civil War
Roundtable**

**June 2026
Headquarters District Iowa
General Order No. 511**

- The **Sixth meeting** of the Spring campaign will **June 18** (Thursday)** at the **Machine Shed**
- The Program will open at 5:30 PM with the meal served at **6:30 PM**.
- Our program *Randee Fieselmann (U of Iowa) The Union First: Community and Commitment in the 1st Iowa Infantry*
- Meal choices **Stuffed Pork Loin and Hickory Smoked Chicken \$27.00**
- Reservations & payment will be accepted until **June 15 and paym**

By command of Brigadier General Gordon McKenzie

Our web address www.dmcivilwar.com

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NOTICE this meeting is on **Thursday**.

A big thank you to John Liepa who contributed the largest donation that the DMCWRT has received.

Now is the time for someone to step forward and pick up the mantle of DMCWRT Adjutant. I will be retiring for the position with this meeting. It probably requires 4-6 hours per month and a laser printer capable of duplex printing would be helpful.

Ashes in the Breadbasket: Hard War in the Shenandoah Valley

<https://emergingcivilwar.com/2026/05/21/ashes-in-the-breadbasket-hard-war-in-the-shenandoah-valley/>

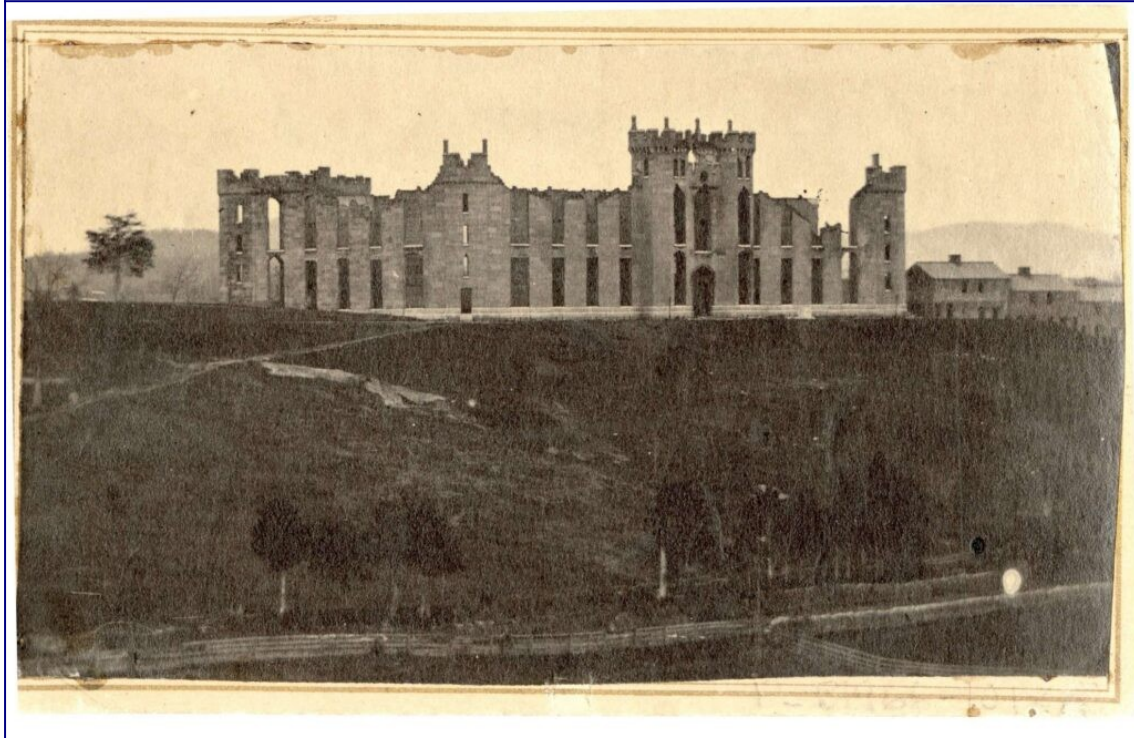
In the autumn of 1864, as the American Civil War dragged on for another brutal year, the fertile corridor between the Blue Ridge and Allegheny Mountains became the stage for yet another campaign. This one, however, was one of the most controversial campaigns of the conflict. The Shenandoah Valley, long known as the “Breadbasket of the Confederacy,” was systematically stripped, burned, and rendered incapable of sustaining an army. What unfolded there under the command of Union Gen. Philip Sheridan was not simply a military operation. It was a turning point in how wars would be fought.

The Shenandoah Valley was more than picturesque farmland; it was a lifeline for the South. Its rich soil produced grain, livestock, and supplies that fed Confederate armies, particularly those under Gen. Robert E. Lee, then defending Richmond and Petersburg, Virginia. Just as critically, the Valley functioned as a natural corridor for troop movements and constant Federal embarrassment, allowing Confederate forces to threaten Washington, D.C., and launch raids into the North.

By 1864, Union leaders had grown weary of these recurring threats. Earlier Confederate successes in the Valley, including those led by Gen. Thomas J. “Stonewall” Jackson in 1862, underscored the region’s importance. The solution, increasingly, was not just to defeat Confederate armies, but to destroy the Valley’s usefulness as a resource and avenue for invasion.

The first major incursion in the Valley in 1864 was led by Union Gen. Franz Sigel. He was born in Germany and served there until 1852, when he immigrated to the United States. He was extremely popular with the growing German population, and his popularity led to his being commissioned as a general. Sigel fought in several campaigns throughout the war. His appointment to command in the Valley was a boost to Lincoln’s re-election bid in 1864.

Facing Sigel in the Shenandoah Valley was former vice president of the United States and now Confederate Gen. John C. Breckinridge. He brought together a ragtag army of 4,100 troops, including the Corps of Cadets from the Virginia Military Institute (VMI). On May 15, 1864, they met Sigel's forces at New Market. After a hard fight, Sigel was driven from the field, and yet another embarrassing Union defeat occurred in the Shenandoah.



The Virginia Military Institute (VMI), after it was burned by General David Hunter. National Park Service.

Sigel was quickly removed from command, and Gen. David Hunter was inserted as the next commander to try the Valley.

Grant's orders to Hunter through General-in-Chief Henry Halleck were: "In pushing up the Valley... it is desirable that nothing should be left to invite the enemy to return."

Hunter was more successful than his predecessors and marched up the Shenandoah Valley toward Staunton. At Piedmont (New Hope), Virginia, Hunter encountered a force under the command of Confederate Gen. William "Grumble" Jones. Outgunned and outnumbered, Jones held as long as he could, losing his life in the process.

The battle of Piedmont was an overwhelming Union victory and a turning point in the Shenandoah. Building on his victory, Hunter marched through Staunton, destroying stores and railroads, and continued to Lexington, where he burned the barracks of the VMI cadets in retaliation for their involvement at New Market. Hunter also had the home of former Virginia Governor John Letcher burned for his involvement in Virginia's secession.

Hunter's success was short-lived as he advanced on Lynchburg, where he was confronted by Confederate Gen. Jubal Early and defenders of the city. Hunter's cautiousness and a ruse by

Early and the townspeople delayed Hunter long enough for Early to score a victory. What ensued was another embarrassing defeat and a rebel army at the gates of Washington.

To neutralize the Shenandoah Valley as a resource of provision and invasion, something needed to be done. The solution came in the form of a harder war, which one historian called “total war.” Under the broader strategic vision of Lt. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant, Union forces would target not only enemy soldiers, but also the economic infrastructure that sustained them.

Major General Philip Sheridan was given command and clear orders: neutralize Lt. Gen. Jubal Early’s Confederate army and deny the Shenandoah Valley as a resource to the Confederacy. Grant told Sheridan, “If the war is to last another year, we want the Shenandoah Valley to remain a barren waste,” advising him to “eat out, Virginia, clear and clean as far as [the Rebels] go, so that crows flying over it for the balance of this season will have to carry their provender with them.”

Other similar campaigns followed, including Union Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman’s operations in Georgia. While in Georgia, Sherman’s troops burned as they went, destroying supplies and railroad infrastructure, making “Georgia howl” in the process.

Both campaigns were devastating to the southern economy and morale. While Sherman’s March to the Sea was a massive movement and covered more territory than Sheridan’s campaign, the policy of “total war” was applied with relentless precision and devastating results in the Shenandoah Valley. The destruction of the Valley not only hindered the economy, but also removed a major source of food for the south’s primary army. In thirteen days, the once bountiful Valley was turned into a charred wasteland.

From September through October 1864, Union troops conducted systematic destruction across the Middle and Lower Shenandoah Valley. Barns were torched. Mills were dismantled or burned. Crops ready for harvest were set ablaze, leaving the fields blackened. Livestock was slaughtered or driven away to deny their use to the Confederates and to feed hungry Union soldiers.

The scale was staggering. Thousands of barns filled with wheat, hay, and equipment were reduced to ash. Sheridan later reported that the Valley had been made “a barren waste.” His men referred to the campaign simply as “The Burning.”

The destruction was not random. Orders were specific: target resources that could support Confederate forces. Homes were generally spared, though on occasion they were put to the torch, and civilians suffered deeply as their livelihoods vanished in flames.

“The people should be informed that so long as an army can subsist among them, recurrences of these raids must be expected, and we are determined to stop them at all hazards.”

For the residents of the Valley, the campaign was devastating. Families who had relied on generations of farming found themselves facing winter with little to no food. Smoke hung over the countryside for weeks, a constant reminder of what had been lost.

A Mennonite Valley resident observed, “The Union army came up the Valley, sweeping everything before them like a hurricane.”

Shenandoah Valley resident and soldier Newton Burkholder described what he saw: “For miles glowing spots of burning, visible tongues of flames still licking about heavy beams and sills, flames sometimes of many colors from burning grain and forage.”

Even some Union soldiers expressed unease, as the line between military necessity and moral cost was not always clear.

An Ohio infantryman wrote his wife, “I cannot witness the burning of barns and mills without thinking of the great suffering that will be brought upon the poor people of this country, who had no part or voice in bringing on this most cruel war.”



The Burner Farm in Page County was spared from fire after a young resident traded eggs for the barn. Photo by Author.

From a strict military perspective, the campaign achieved its objective. The Shenandoah Valley could no longer sustain Confederate operations. Jubal Early’s forces were weakened, and the threat to the North diminished significantly.

Sheridan’s victories at battles such as Third Winchester, Fisher’s Hill, Tom’s Brook, and Cedar Creek cemented Union control of the region. The Valley, once a Confederate stronghold, was effectively neutralized.

But the legacy of “The Burning” remains complex. Was it a necessary step toward ending the war? The answer is just as complicated, but I believe it was necessary. The devastation

in the Valley accelerated the end of the war and, along with the capture of Atlanta, helped secure a decisive vote of confidence in President Abraham Lincoln's bid for reelection.



Bonny Brook

produced swords and percussion caps for the Confederacy. The house remains, but the grindstone is all that is left from the factory. Photo by Author.

The campaign stands as a stark reminder that war is not confined to battlefields. It reaches homes, livelihoods, and futures. In 1864, the Shenandoah Valley became a proving ground for a new kind of warfare, one where victory could be measured not just in battles won, but in the ability to break an enemy's will and capacity to fight. The destruction of the Shenandoah Valley had lasting effects on the war itself, but it also affected the Valley families long after the guns went silent. One hundred sixty-two years later, things are peaceful once more, but the Valley still shows scars from one of the first "hard war" campaigns.

In the ashes of the Valley's barns and fields, the modern age of war began to take shape.

Aaron Siever grew up in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia. Since he was a child, he has been interested in the American Civil War. After a career in law enforcement, Aaron dove into his passion for history and started Aaron's Civil War Travels LLC. A tour and lecture company. Aaron also maintains a YouTube channel under the same name.

