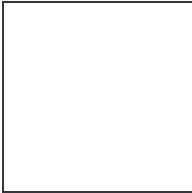


Wyckoff on Kirkland:

Part I

<http://npsfrsp.wordpress.com/2010/08/27/a-guest-post-from-mac-wyckoff-what-we-really-know-about-richard-kirkland-the-angel-of-maryes-heights-part-1-origins/>

[Introductory note: For more than two decades Mac Wyckoff served as a front-line historian at Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park. During that time he also became the world's leading authority on all things South Carolina as they relate to the Army of Northern Virginia. His newest book, to be published early next year by Broadfoot Publishing, will be a history of the 2d South Carolina Infantry, of Kershaw's brigade of South Carolinians. Nobody has seen more source material related to the 2d South Carolina than Mac. What follows is derived from an appendix he has assembled for his book.



The Kirkland Memorial at Fredericksburg

On December 14, 1862, the day after the bloody Union assaults on Marye's Heights at Fredericksburg, Sergeant Richard Rowland Kirkland of the 2nd South Carolina risked his life by giving humanitarian aid to the wounded Union soldiers in front of the heights. It's a world-famous story, commemorated by an impressive statue by Felix de Weldon, who also created the statue for the Iwo Jima Memorial.

But what evidence do we have of what Kirkland did that day? How valid is it? And ultimately, how should we view the story of Richard Kirkland at the Battle of Fredericksburg? In response to intensified interest in the Kirkland story (there's even a [film](#) out on Kirkland, featuring the park's Donald Pfanz) and the persistent online debate about the historical basis of the Kirkland story (for example, see the dialogue at [Civil War Memory](#)), Mac has assembled and assessed virtually all known primary references to the story of Richard Kirkland at Fredericksburg. Here in slightly abridged form is what he has to say. If you want his full commentary on Kirkland (and everything else you need to know about the 2d South Carolina), please order his upcoming book at [Broadfoot Publishing.](#)]

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The Kirkland story as we know it had its origins in two accounts published in early 1880. The most famous (but, as we will see, not the first) was written by former Confederate

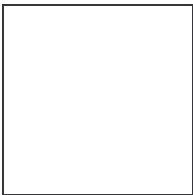
General Joseph B. Kershaw, who commanded the brigade in which Richard Kirkland's 2d South Carolina served. I strongly suggest you read the account in full, which you can find [here](#) (as published in the *New York Times* on February 10, 1880)..

There are a few minor mistakes in or questions about Kershaw's account:



Joseph B. Kershaw

- Kirkland was not promoted to lieutenant for gallantry at Gettysburg—he remained a sergeant until his death at Chickamauga.
- He was not in Company D, but originally in Company E (the Camden Volunteers), with an 1862 transfer to Company G, the Flat Rock Guards.
- It's unlikely Kirkland jumped the stone wall to get to the Union wounded. As shown in the photo below, there is a break in the wall in front of the Stevens House. After gathering water from the well (on the right of the picture), Kirkland probably just walked through the Stephens's yard to the open plain beyond.
- It seems unlikely that after seventeen years Kershaw could have recalled the exact words used in his conversation with Kirkland.



The Stevens house. The well likely used by Kirkland is on the extreme right edge of the image. Note the break in the wall.

But these are insignificant points. Most of Kershaw's account seems reasonable.

Still, I must admit that at times in my early research of the 2nd South Carolina that I lacked confidence in the veracity of the story.

To satisfy my curiosity, I began to investigate the Kirkland incident around 1990. The crux of my research focused on what motivated Kershaw to tell the story in 1880. (Finding out what people do is the easier part of research; finding out why they do what they do is much harder, sometimes impossible.) As I set out on my research, I did not expect to find an answer to this question. I remember thinking that I was looking for a needle in the haystack, if a needle even existed.

To my surprise and joy, I found the needle—the prompt for Kershaw’s telling of the Kirkland story—almost immediately. Spinning the microfilm backward just a few frames from the Kershaw article, there it was, an article written in the *News and Courier’s* January 23, 1880 edition—a week *before* Kershaw’s famous account. Read the full article [here](#). This earlier article, a secondary source written by a correspondent whose identity is not known, is the key to understanding why Kershaw wrote his account six days later: the correspondent asked Kershaw to elaborate on the story and name the soldier in question.

Several errors appeared in the first account (notably, Kirkland was not wounded at Fredericksburg), and so Kershaw offered both corrections and elaborations—most importantly identifying the Kirkland as the heroic figure. But again the discrepancies between the two accounts are not the issue here. **The important point: contrary to popular perception, Kershaw did not originate the Kirkland story, and clearly he did not fabricate it.**

But is there anything in the historical record that might cause us to question Kershaw’s motivation in responding to the original author and telling the story? To answer this, I went to Camden, Kershaw’s hometown. I talked to several people at the Camden Archives, including Joseph Matheson, and at the Kershaw County Historical Society who were knowledgeable about the Kirkland incident and Kershaw and Kirkland.

I specifically asked if they knew of any relationship between Kershaw and Kirkland and their families. Their answer was that no friendship existed between the two men and that there were not any marriages between the two families that might have given Kershaw reason to tell the story and name Kirkland. In fact, as they explained it, it would have been illogical for there to have been a friendship or family marriage. Kershaw was a general from the city of Camden who was in the first rank of Camden high society. Kirkland was a sergeant from a rural area whose family were middle class farmers. There’s no evidence that Kershaw had a personal motivation to promote Kirkland as a hero.

Robert Mosher comments:

Well I can offer one suggestion as to the identity of the author of the original item in the Charleston News and Courier – it would appear to be the work of Carlyle McKinley – a

Lost Cause poet according to <http://www.bartleby.com/226/1914.html> and an advocate of deportation of African-Americans from the U.S. as he argued in his book “An Appeal to Pharoah, The Negro Problem and It’s Radical Solution” which can be found on Google Books and apparently in reprint. McKinley was also a journalist and then editor of the News and Courier. BTW – the paper itself also appears to have been a supporter of Kershaw’s political ambitions if the references found via Google Books are to be believed.

“Kevin” comments:

Thanks to Mac for taking on this project and for providing the additional information. I am looking forward to the next two installments. At this point, I have one question. I found the initial story to be quite interesting, but why are we assuming that this story is about Kirkland? There are a number of details that seem to argue against it. You say the “discrepancies are not the issue here” but how do we know that Kershaw and this author are referring to the same individual. Thanks.

“John” comments:

Kevin,

The correspondent in the Charleston News and Courier’s January 23, 1880 edition, very specifically addresses Kershaw as perhaps a means of clarifying his query. Kershaw’s reply, a week later via the New York Times February 10, 1880 edition, clearly references this query, and acknowledges the discrepancies of detail stating: “Your Columbia correspondent referred to the incident narrated here, telling the story as it was told to him, and inviting corrections.” Kershaw proceeds to relay the story, from his firsthand experience, and does his best to smooth out these details which you point out, “seem to argue against it.” Even with seventeen years intervening, Kershaw would be, at least to my mind, a very valid, primary source on the Kirkland story. One must remember that it was in the 1880s that former commanders, north and south, were beginning to relate their memoirs in a variety of publications, most prominently in the “Century Magazine” which would later publish the collection as the multi-volume “Battles and Leaders of the Civil War.” One should also consider the memoirs of Ulysses S. Grant, published shortly after his death, in 1885. I have not noticed, any great movement to question the validity of these works based on the passage of time in which it took these men to commit them to paper.

So, no, the “discrepancies are not the issue here”. Kershaw has made it clear that this is the story asked of by the other author. Mr. Wyckoff is very patiently presenting this.

“Kevin” again:

John,

I am not challenging Kershaw as a reliable source in this matter. I am not even challenging his memory of the incident he recalled in the newspaper. I am simply raising the possibility that the two are not referring to the same individual.

Since when are discrepancies between stories, especially the two presented here, not an issue for historians to address?

“John” again:

Kevin,

The initial correspondent apparently was quite comfortable with Kershaw’s notice of discrepancies, and the version with which Kershaw relayed. Perhaps someday, down the road, someone will turn up a letter from the initial correspondent wherein he says something to the effect that no, that was not the incident he was thinking of, but until that day, the way I see it, and Mr. Wyckoff sees it, and evidently 130 years worth of the majority of people see it, the story of Richard Kirkland is believable and assuring in that it suggests there are acts of kindness possible in the hearts and minds of even warring factions.

“Kevin”:

No one is suggesting that “acts of kindness” are not possible during war and I am not even arguing that there is no evidence for such an act during the battle of Fredericksburg. I am pleased to hear that you and Mac are on the same page, but that should not stop me, or anyone for that matter, from asking questions. That’s what historians do.

Hopefully, Mac will respond to my question.

MAS:

I’d be interested in hearing Mr. Wyckoff’s response, too.

I’d also be interested in the reaction to Mr. Mosher’s tentative identification of the author of the original letter. This seems to get closer to the motivation for Kershaw’s tale than the other lines of inquiry, and to reinforce the possibility that the legend has less to do with Sergeant Kirkland at the battle of Fredericksburg, than with the cultural, social, and political milieu of South Carolina in 1880.

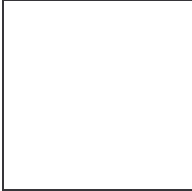
“John”

Michael: At the conclusion of Mac’s work, I’m going to do a post that looks at the Kirkland story in the broader context of evidence, memory, and public history. I’ll get into some of the good points you made in your work over at Civil War Memory. I too found Mr. Mosher’s identification interesting, but let’s let the series play out and then throw it in a pot and see what comes out. Thanks for reading... John H.

Part II:

<http://npsfrsp.wordpress.com/2010/08/29/from-mac-wyckoff-richard-kirkland-part-2-other-evidence/>

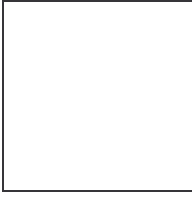
[For Part 1, click [here](#). A third post will offer up Mac's conclusion, and we'll follow with our own discussion. Again, we thank him for giving us an advance look at his work on this very interesting topic. Wherever possible, we have added links to the original source material that's in the park's collection. The maps and overlays have been added by Hennessy.]



In the years after Kershaw came forward with his story, several members of the 2nd South Carolina—in speeches and in writing—confirmed (or perhaps echoed) Kershaw’s story without adding any substantial details. Among those telling essentially the same story as Kershaw was Captain William Zack Leitner of the Camden Volunteers, Kirkland’s original company (click [here](#) and [here](#) to see his accounts). Another member of the Camden Volunteers told the Kirkland story, writing under the pen name of “[Veteran](#).” William Terry [Shumate](#) and his brother Robert Young Hayne Shumate of the Butler Guards (Co. B) both wrote about the incident. Thomas M. Rembert of the Camden Volunteers and William Dunlap Trantham of the Flat Rock Guards, a close friend of Kirkland, also wrote about of Kirkland’s deed, though both had transferred to other units and were not present with the 2nd South Carolina at Fredericksburg. Edward Porter Alexander, the well-known artilleryist and observer of the Battle of Fredericksburg, wrote about the incident two years after Kershaw. There is also a post-war account by a member of the 16th New York that clearly and simply re-states Kershaw’s original account.

But there are two memoirs that post-date Kershaw’s account that do add details to the story. Most interesting is that of an unidentified member of the 2d South Carolina who in 1919 wrote a tribute to his friend Isaac Rentz of the Brooks Guards. It’s short and worth reading—click [here](#).

There are three notable things about this account—two related to detail and one to circumstance. This soldier claims that Kirkland asked both his captain and colonel, and was refused permission by both (did he then go to Kershaw?). The writer also adds a character to the story by claiming that his friend Isaac Rentz joined Kirkland in his efforts—that Rentz “filled several canteens and carried water to Kirkland and they gave water to every crying man and was not hurt.”



Aerial view of the Sunken Road area, with key sites and the extent of the Union advance indicated. While a few Union wounded likely lay between the limit of advance and the Sunken Road, most would have been located to the right of the blue line on the map. We cannot say how far Kirkland or any other samaritans might have ventured. Map by Hennessy. Click to enlarge.

But from an evidentiary and historiographical standpoint, something else stands out. In conveying the story, the writer could not recall which battle served as the setting for this event. Had he simply reflected back the Kirkland tale as told by Kershaw and others, that detail would likely have been forefront in his narrative. But it was not, which suggests an independence from other accounts that, perhaps, accords this telling of the story more significance than others.

Another post-Kershaw account adds an additional detail. R.N. McKinley of the 18th Mississippi Barksdale's Brigade adds that the Yankees on the field cheered Kirkland.

It was in this battle that Sergeant Kirkland asked permission of General Kershaw to let him fill his canteen with water and take it to the wounded Yankees in our front, who lay all night and that day calling for water. The General consented but told him he would do it as his own risk. When the Yankees saw what he was endeavoring to do, all fighting ceased and they gave him a royal Hu-Yah.

There's no question that the many post-Kershaw accounts, with the exception of the Rentz story, don't seem to add much to the historical record. They may help confirm Kershaw's account, or they may simply reflect it. But there are two sources that may be more important than all of these—two sources that **pre-date** Kershaw's 1880 description by a full decade.

Perhaps the most significant reference to what may have been Kirkland comes from South Carolina Colonel James Robert Hagood of the 1st South Carolina.

He was not an eyewitness to the event and he does not specifically name Kirkland, but his [description](#) bears close resemblance to Kershaw's telling. Hagood wrote his memoir prior to his death in 1870. It was not published, so Kershaw could not have known of it. Here's what Hagood says.

The following incident occurred before the stonewall the day after the assault which deserves to be recorded. A young soldier of Kershaw's Brigade, unable longer to withstand the cries for water of a wounded Federal in front of our works, filled his canteen from a comrade's and in the face of a deadly fire from the enemy's picket line

(not withstanding, too, the entreaties of his companions) advanced to the wounded soldier and relieved his thirst. The poor wretch, grateful for the act of humanity, raised himself with difficulty on one elbow and with the other shook the now empty canteen to his comrades who were firing as a sign of the Confederate mission. The firing at once ceased and the brave soldier, who had risked his life to relieve a fellow creature's suffering, retreated safely to our lines.

Because Hagood was not present, we are left to wonder both who told him this story and who the Confederate from Kershaw's brigade might have been. But it is clear evidence that long before Kershaw was prompted to write about Kirkland in 1880, the story of a South Carolinian going over the wall at Fredericksburg was in circulation.

And another account from an unexpected source helps confirm that at least one Confederate went over the wall to aid the Union wounded. It is the most immediate of all, written just over a month after the battle, by Walt Whitman. In his Memoranda for January 21, 1863 while tending to injured Union soldiers in the Patent Office in Washington, he talked to a Pennsylvania soldier who lay between the lines in front of the stone wall at Fredericksburg. Whitman described the conversation (the ellipses are Whitman's):

He got badly hit in his leg and side at Fredericksburgh that eventful Saturday, 13th of December. He lay the succeeding two days and nights helpless on the field, between the city and those grim terraces of batteries; his company and regiment had been compell'd to leave him to his fate. To make matters worse, it happen'd he lay with his head slightly down hill, and could not help himself. At the end of some fifty hours he was brought off, with other wounded, under a flag of truce....I ask him how the rebels treated him as he lay during those two days and nights within reach of them – whether they came to him – whether they abused him? He answers that several of the rebels, soldiers and others, came to him at one time and another. A couple of them, who were together, spoke roughly and sarcastically, but nothing worse. One middle-aged man, however, who seemed to be moving around the field, among the dead and wounded, for benevolent purposes, came to him in a way he will never forget; treated our soldier kindly, bound up his wounds, cheered him, gave him a couple of biscuits and a drink of whiskey and water; asked him if he could eat some beef.

Whitman's account is strikingly similar to Kershaw's with some different details. The obvious discrepancy is the statement that the humanitarian was a middle-aged man. Kirkland was nineteen-years-old at Fredericksburg. Still, once again, a Confederate among the Union wounded at Fredericksburg.

The most unexpected account is that of David Augustus Dickert, the historian of Kershaw's brigade. Writing in 1899 when the Kirkland story was well-known in South Carolina, Dickert places the story during a lull in the charges on December 13 and credits a Georgian rather than a fellow South Carolinian of his own brigade. Significantly, Dickert was wounded on December 13 and would not have been present on the 14th, when Kershaw claimed Kirkland performed his deed of mercy. He may indeed be

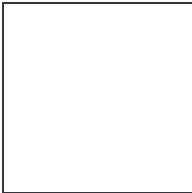
describing an entirely different event—no accounts have been found that support the story as told by Dickert. Still, it adds to the weight of evidence that Confederates (or at least a Confederate) went over the wall to succor Union wounded.

[In the next post, Mac will offer up some concluding thoughts on where all this leaves us with respect to Richard Kirkland and the legend that surrounds him. We'll supplement that with a bit of analysis of our own.]

Part III

<http://npsfrsp.wordpress.com/2010/08/31/kirkland-a-hero-or-bandwagon-evidence-memory-and-public-history/#comment-534>

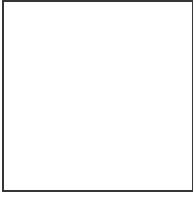
Before I plunge in, let me thank Mac Wyckoff for sharing his research. I also want to share with you his conclusion about the evidence he has presented on the Kirkland story.



Mac's daughter Melinda in front of the Kirkland memorial on the 125th anniversary of the battle, in 1987.

“Historians constantly face the issue of what is factual. Unable to question and cross examine the deceased participants and witnesses of a historical event, we have to make decisions on whether the testimony is credible. In the case of the “Angel of Marye’s Heights,” there is overwhelming testimony, in both quantity and quality, that someone gave humanitarian aid to suffering Union soldiers in front of the stonewall at Fredericksburg. Although there may have been more than one person providing the aid, the only known name is that of Richard Rowland Kirkland of the 2nd South Carolina. We will never know precisely what happened on that December day in Fredericksburg, but the evidence points to a remarkable event. Too many accounts exist for the story to be a fabrication.”

There is no question that cases like Kirkland present the NPS or any caretaker of history with an immense challenge. When a story or a place becomes a cultural icon—told and retold, interpreted and reinterpreted—it’s easy to lose track of what we really know and what we don’t know. It’s also easy to lose the distinction between the story itself and how that story has been used. We have dealt with recent examples of this in this forum: the [auction block](#) in downtown Fredericksburg and [Stonewall Jackson’s arm](#). But neither of those have the charged aura that surrounds Richard Kirkland. His is a case study that embodies evidence, memory, and the practice of public history (in this case, by an agency of the federal government).



William Ludwell Sheppard's image of Kirkland at Fredericksburg. Many would follow.

Let's start with the evidence. Some have postulated (see Michael Schaffner's thoughtful post over at [Civil War Memory](#)) that the Kirkland story may have had its origins in a conscious post-war attempt to forge a specific and favorable view of the Confederate soldier and the war at large, i.e. the story is not the product of history and fact, but rather may be the product of memory—"the cultural, social, and political milieu of South Carolina in 1880." In light of that, what do we REALLY know, and what can we reasonably conclude?

- We know there were wounded left on the field in front of the stonewall at Fredericksburg for most of two days after the battle (a 10-minute review of sources in the park's collection produced several references beyond Whitman's and Kershaw's. Click [here](#) for some examples.)
- We know that within six weeks of the battle, Walt Whitman recorded being told by a wounded Union soldier that as he lay between the lines, "several of the rebels, soldiers and others, came to him at one time and other" and that one "middle-aged man" moved about the field, "among the dead and wounded for benevolent purposes." It is not clear if this particular Samaritan was a soldier or one of the "others" mentioned by Whitman.
- We know that before his death in 1870, James Hagood wrote specifically of a soldier from Kershaw's brigade going over the wall to assist Union wounded.
- We know that in 1880, after being asked to identify a man from his brigade who went over the wall, Kershaw named Richard Kirkland, providing extensive additional details because, he said, his interaction with Kirkland that day was "indelibly impressed on my memory."
- We know that in the decades after Kershaw identified Kirkland, at least five members of the 2d South Carolina stepped forward to retell the story, by implication endorsing if not confirming it.

What we don't know:

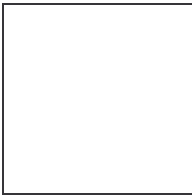
- We can't say that any of the Samaritans described by either Whitman or Hagood was Kirkland.
- We cannot say whether those who stepped forward after Kershaw's 1880 account were reinforcing or simply restating Kershaw's account. With one exception—the story of

Isaac Rentz, written by a friend in 1919—the post-Kershaw accounts offer few additional, distinguishing details that would allow us to speculate that the writer witnessed the event rather than simply read about it at Kershaw’s hands.

- Though apparently prompted to record his (Kershaw’s) memories by a newspaper editor, Carlyle McKinley, who became known for his romantic, sentimental portrayals of the South (thank you Robert Mosher, a reader, for adding this to the record), we can’t document (beyond speculating) that or why Kershaw might have fabricated his story about Kirkland.

So is Kirkland a hero or a bandwagon?

I’d offer he is both.



Having wrestled with some very tangled historical issues over the decades (rarely is any event or historical question framed in anything but mud), the progression of evidence in Kirkland’s case seems fairly straightforward. First, we know that one or more Confederates went over the wall to aid the Union wounded. Second, we have been given the name of one of those men: Kirkland. Is there really any basis for doubting Kershaw’s statement about this? Why would we? Certainly, if we’re using an evidentiary scale here, the evidence that would discredit Kershaw’s statement is far, far weaker than the evidence that suggests his statement about Kirkland is in its fundamentals (if not details) based in some fact.

It seems to me that in dealing with these things, it’s vital to distinguish the event (or story) itself from the way that story has been used. There is no doubt that Kirkland became a bandwagon, and there is no doubt that his story, as relayed by Kershaw, other veterans, later historians, and (especially!) artists (see [here](#) [here](#) [here](#) [here](#) [here](#)) became a stone in the foundation of the Lost Cause, used to demonstrate the virtue and humanity of the Confederate soldier (even, recently, to the point of reducing the battle itself to insignificance in some eyes). But, Kirkland’s status as a Lost Cause icon does not render his story untrue (just as the slave auction block’s imagined threat to Southern virtue has little to do with the evidence that speaks to its historic use). As Gary Gallagher points out, the Lost Cause endures because enough of it is based in fact to make it arguable (at least to some).



With the Kirkland Memorial as a backdrop, Historian George Rable speaks at the 2005 dedication of the restored Sunken Road.

Let's pass the Kirkland legend and monument to the realm of public history. It's a classic case of public historians being buffeted on one side by the emerging and growing historical record and on the other by the force of tradition. What do we do with it? In fact, historians at the park for years have been acutely aware of the vagaries embodied by the source material. While we largely accept the essentials of the Kirkland story, we are also quick to discuss the uncertainties that surround it and, significantly, the cultural values that have overlain it—the use of the story for cultural, political, and social ends. (Michael Schaffner's piece at *Civil War Memory* is a highly useful cautionary note on this account). And know too that if evidence emerges that disproves the Kirkland story, we'll lead the way in shifting our interpretation away from the event itself and to the creation and use of the story as a stimulus for postwar reconciliation and sustenance of a Southern identity.

But the evidentiary standard for demolishing legend must necessarily be high. With Richard Kirkland, that standard has not been met. The story is due careful handling and a great deal of context, but not (at least now) outright reconsideration. And, for the diligent one of you who might some day turn up a body of evidence that forces a reconsideration or rejection of the story, bear in mind that a greater understanding of history does not always portend the revision of memory (as those of us in the history business have learned the hard way).

Posted in [Fredericksburg](#)

Erik Nelson:

An interesting discussion, but perhaps a bit limited. The Kirkland story purportedly occurred on December 14th, in daylight. According to the accounts provided here, though, it is clear that some Confederates were over the stone wall during the night of December 13/14. Again, according to the accounts, some of them were a bit rough with the suffering Yankees, but others attempted to provide some level of relief. From other accounts we know that Confederate troops stripped some of Union dead for clothing. On a cold winter night, who could blame them. Though no one has said so, it is conceivable that some of the clothing was stripped from soldiers who were not quite dead, which of course comes across as brutal (unless one was there and exposed to the weather and more worried about survival instead of posterity). In the sentimentality of late nineteenth century reconciliation, who would want to bring up unpleasant details? A heroic Confederate, instead of freezing and callous troops was surely a better story. I do not have specific evidence that this occurred, except for the Union dead being stripped of warm cloths, but if we are to discuss history, we need to handle evidence carefully. It is not so much what someone wrote or said. Anyone can write and say pretty much anything. The historian has to figure out why something was written or said. There should be no question that some Confederates tried to relieve the suffering of wounded men, but we ought not to assume it occurred in broad daylight or under fire.

Mac Wycoff:

Eric

There was undoubtedly pillaging and theft by Confederates on the dead and wounded in front of the stone wall, but that was not the point of this article. My purpose was simply to state the evidence I have found on the Kirkland incident as a growing number of people are questioning whether the Kershaw story of Kirkland's activities was a fabrication. The evidence overwhelmingly supports Kershaw's story of Kirkland's humanitarian efforts, but the evidence also strongly suggests that there may have been others. A friend of Private Rentz states that Rentz assisted Kirkland. There is also an account of a Georgian and one of either a masculine looking woman or male soldier dressed as a woman providing assistance to wounded Union soldiers in front of the stone wall.

Your interest in other things going on in front of the wall which are less virtuous is worthy of another discussion.

Erik Nelson:

Mac,

I don't think we can separate the pillaging from the humanitarianism when discussing the Kirkland story. As historians, we always need to examine the motive behind whatever evidence we have. What went on in front of the stone wall was not something that all of the participants were going to be proud of. It is also pretty typical to put a veneer on war's ugliness, after the fact. There was often more sentiment than reality in what many folks wrote about in the late nineteenth century and that context makes our twenty first century discussion more difficult.

"Peter":

I don't think you can get too far with the Rentz story. Rentz's friend can't recall the battle, but can correctly recall that there is a water fountain to Kirkland in Camden? It seems more likely that J.B. Hunter, when writing about the death of his friend Rentz, was inspired by the story behind the local monument and embellished the account. So basically, as post 2 points out, the only evidence that Richard Kirkland himself performed these acts comes from Kershaw (with a host of others basically repeating the story). So the question hinges solely on "do you believe Kershaw?"

"npsfrsp":

Peter: I don't disagree. Clearly the Rentz story is a minor thread in all this. But, with so few threads available, it's worth looking closely at every one. You are correct, it all comes down to Kershaw... John H.

MAS:

I'd qualify the statements "do you believe Kershaw?" and "it all comes down to Kershaw" with the observation that we need to choose which Kershaw to believe — the Kershaw who omitted Kirkland from his own after action report of Fredericksburg, as well as his later article for the "Battles and Leaders" series in *The Century Magazine*, or the Kershaw who wrote, not in an official or historical capacity, but for the popular audience of the "News and Courier."

I think I'd give more credence to the latter Kershaw if he didn't sound so little like the first, and so much more like a Carlyle McKinley. The story-telling tone holds right down to the repeated third person references to "the General" rather than "I." It strikes me as telling that even Kershaw's letter doesn't sound like a first-person account. But that's basically all we have.

John Hennessey: Just a couple of final observations on the omission from the Official Records of any mention of Kirkland's act—and the suggestion that that somehow supports the theory that the story was fabricated. Official reports were written for three reasons (among others):

- To fulfill the organizational requirement that a unit's actions be documented.
- To present the activities of that unit or its commander in the best possible light.
- To promote the qualities that were vital to the success of the organization.

I have spent much of my adult life working with a heavy mix of official records and personal accounts. There are hundreds, thousands of stories of valor—some of them incredible—that gain no mention in official reports. Read O'Reilly's Fredericksburg, or my Second Manassas, and look at the sources as they relate to stories of valor and humanity (Kirkland would have qualified on both accounts). Rarely are they derived from the Official Records. Moreover, when such stories do emerge from the ORs, they almost always reflect acts of valor, not humanity. Commanders had an organizational interest in noting and promoting acts of valor. They had little organizational interest in promoting stories of humanity in their official reports. They were not historians trying to capture a full range of events. They were purposeful recorders of a very narrow view of an event, intended to serve the needs of the organization. That Kirkland doesn't appear is typical. If he had, it would be highly unusual.

More than that, think about the context within which Confederate officers wrote their post-battle narratives at Fredericksburg. The South was in a state of uproar over the bombardment and looting of the town by the Union army. Arabella Petit of Fluvanna County, for example, declared to her spouse, "Shoot them, dear husband, every chance you get." It was not an environment where any officer was likely to see personal or organizational advantage in identifying and promoting one of his soldier's compassionate acts toward a member of the Union army.

This is not to offer up any conclusion on Kirkland (my argument here makes it no more or less likely that the story is true). But if we're going to look at the environment that might have helped shape a narrative of valor in 1880, we need to also recognize the

environment that would have discouraged the telling of the same story in December 1862.

“Peter”:

Michael,

I don't disagree, but we can imagine plausible reasons for a change. After the first articles, relatives of Kirkland might have talked to Kershaw, and asked him why didn't you include the story of Kirkland? Maybe Carlyle McKinney had collected from a local person a story about Kirkland, and Kershaw offered “yes, I remember a soldier giving water to the wounded” and then McKinney wrote it up from there. Basically, I think there is no good reason to believe Kershaw, but no good reason to call it a fabrication (or even that Kershaw misremembered). I'd have to say that the lack of any corroboration before the initial story (one that refers to Kirkland by name, or even letters of soldiers trading these stories and suggesting that it might have been Kirkland, either contemporaneously or near-contemporaneously) raises my suspicions enough to not repeat the story as fact. Which is all to say that I more or less agree with you.

MAS:

John, first and foremost, thank you for your continued patience with me. I had a similar concern about the after action reports, but I reasoned thus:

True, individual soldiers get mentioned most often for “acts of valor, not humanity” but Kirkland's valor (“At the risk of his life...” the statue's inscription begins) is what elevates his story above, say, Whitman's middle-aged Samaritan with the biscuits. Along those lines it may be worth notice that the AAR of Colonel Kennedy of the 2nd SC does name a number of officers as well as two enlisted orderlies, but no Kirkland. De Saussure mentions his own medical staff, and chaplain, and Buchanan notes the sacrifice of his hospital attendants, but again, no Kirkland.

More important, Kershaw's letter has an hour and a half (half the winter afternoon) devoted to an impromptu cease fire while Kirkland carries out his ministrations. None of the after-action reports, north or south, mentions any such thing. While the humanity of one man might not deserve official mention, a significant halt in the action would. In fact the northern accounts universally describe the fire as constant, and Kershaw's own report notes with satisfaction the infliction of another 150 casualties on the enemy.

Peter, thank you for your essential agreement. I regret that I allowed the word “fabrication” to slip into my posts. Having spent most of the last half century studying European warfare, and only coming to our own civil war in the last decade, I confess that I did not appreciate the emotional power that this story holds to this day. “Legend” seems to me a better word, because it allows for some factual basis and does not cast the same aspersions on those who believe the story. But better still might be “barracks room tale” – the term Delbruck used for a wealth of other good war stories told across the water.

Every country and every war has them (your earlier reference to the Angel of Mons did not go unappreciated), and I should not be surprised that we are so fond of our own.