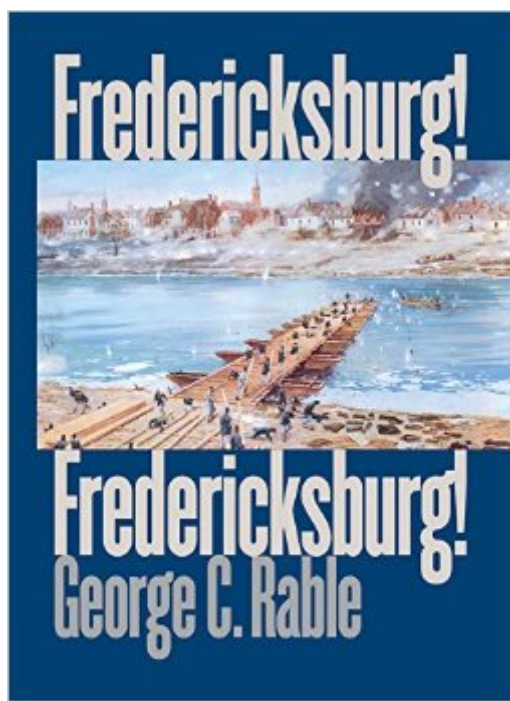


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# Fredericksburg! Fredericksburg!



## Synopsis

During the battle of Gettysburg, as Union troops along Cemetery Ridge rebuffed Pickett's Charge, they were heard to shout, "Give them Fredericksburg!" Their cries reverberated from a clash that, although fought some six months earlier, clearly loomed large in the minds of Civil War soldiers. Fought on December 13, 1862, the battle of Fredericksburg ended in a stunning defeat for the Union. Confederate general Robert E. Lee suffered roughly 5,000 casualties but inflicted more than twice that many losses--nearly 13,000--on his opponent, General Ambrose Burnside. As news of the Union loss traveled north, it spread a wave of public despair that extended all the way to President Lincoln. In the beleaguered Confederacy, the southern victory bolstered flagging hopes, as Lee and his men began to take on an aura of invincibility. George Rable offers a gripping account of the battle of Fredericksburg and places the campaign within its broader political, social, and military context. Blending battlefield and home front history, he not only addresses questions of strategy and tactics but also explores material conditions in camp, the rhythms and disruptions of military life, and the enduring effects of the carnage on survivors--both civilian and military--on both sides.

## Book Information

Series: Civil War America

Hardcover: 688 pages

Publisher: The University of North Carolina Press; First Edition edition (March 18, 2002)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0807826731

ISBN-13: 978-0807826737

Product Dimensions: 6.5 x 2 x 9.6 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.6 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.0 out of 5 starsÂ Â See all reviewsÂ (24 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #421,769 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #12 inÂ Books > History > Americas > United States > Civil War > Campaigns & Battlefields > Fredericksburg #4061 inÂ Books > History > Military > United States

## Customer Reviews

George C. Rable explains in his prologue that he sought a blending of what he characterizes the "old" military history (dealing largely with leaders and dissecting strategy and tactics) and the "new" (focused on soldier life and its connections to larger social themes). And, I think it is fair to say, he well achieved that blending in "Fredericksburg! Fredericksburg!" Combat operations are

competently described, albeit not in deep detail. Where Rable excels is in providing what might be called the "context" of the campaign, including discussions of the impact of McClellan's replacement by Burnside, the continuing controversy over the planned formal issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation, the repercussions of recently conducted state and congressional elections, and the realities of army life in the field. And Rable delves deeply into the experiences of the wounded after the fighting ended and into how the battle was reported, both North and South. For the most part, there is little assessment regarding the performances of the generals on the battlefield; Rable's interests quite evidently focus more upon the lot of the common soldier. Despite the relative lack of emphasis on the tactical operations, the maps are entirely adequate to support the narrative. Only a few months after Rable's book appeared, Frank Augustin O'Reilly published "The Fredericksburg Campaign". Inevitably, a comparison between the two must be made. O'Reilly has written a detailed military history, down to the regiment and battery level, laying out precisely the what, where, and when of combat operations. Fully 60 percent of his 500-plus page text is devoted to the action of December 13, 1862.

Rable's new book will be the darling of academic historians because it is a model of "New Military History" (at least this is one accepted term for it), the relatively recent school of thought that places military conflicts in the context of broad cultural issues such as politics, society, race, and gender. What is downplayed is the importance of strategic and tactical detail of the battle itself. A book about the battle of Fredericksburg can in no way be definitive if the details of the battle itself cover only 92 some odd pages out of a total of 450+ text (non- endnotes, index, etc) pages. It was a BATTLE after all!. The problem with NMH is it requires everything about the CW to be placed in such broad context that a book on a large CW battle would easily run over 1500 pages if you give proper treatment to all of its tenets. I don't see what is wrong with one book on a CW battle being an ultra-detailed tactical battle study with little addressing of social issues while other books cover the other issues such as hospitals, civilians, race, causes, politics, etc etc etc. There is simply no reason why all this must be examined in detail in a single volume. It simply cannot be done in the size of a book that most editors will accept. Invariably, it is the battle details that lose out when something must be cut. Anyway, this does not detract from the fine book that Mr. Rable has written. I give it only 3 stars (which is a positive rating--I would like to give it 3 1/2) because the author failed in my opinion to render an adequate modern tactical treatment of the battle equal in importance to the other issues tackled in the book.

On Dec. 13, 1862, the South won perhaps the most lopsided major battle of the Civil War, in back of the Virginia city of Fredericksburg. Robert E. Lee's rebel army dug in behind a stone wall at the top of a long, steep ridge. His northern counterpart sent blue brigade after blue brigade right up that hill in the cold winter sunlight, in the face of the kind of gunfire that men lean into, as they do a wind-driven hail. By the time sunset stopped the carnage, the North had lost nearly 13,000 men. The battle became a watchword, not just for Yankee defeat but for the folly of sending troops on long charges against dug-in enemies. Six months later, when Union troops along Cemetery Ridge poured a deadly fire into Pickett's Charge, they shouted to one another, "Give them Fredericksburg! Fredericksburg!" Thus the title of George Rable's new look at the battle. In this book, he's written an excellent and gripping description of the bravery and folly and just plain cussedness of one battle, and all war. But more than that, he's tried to bridge a schism that's often as rancorous as the North-South political divorce of 1860. Look at any bookstore's shelf of Civil War titles and you'll likely notice they come in two varieties: the "battles and leaders" books, and the "social history" books. This bedevils our understanding of the times. The academics write slim volumes on social theory, and look on enviously as tacticians and retired military men rack up sales for vast books on every battlefield detail. To a professor, it's positively baffling. James McPherson, the dean of Civil War history, in his provocative essay "What's the Matter With History?"

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