

Raid, Murder and Retribution
The Destruction of the Weldon Railroad, December 1864.

The Weldon Railroad was one of the last important supply lines for Robert E. Lee's Confederate army besieged around Richmond and Petersburg during the last winter of the Civil War. In December 1864, Union commanders US Grant and George Meade ordered a massive raid of over 20,000 men to destroy the railroad all the way to the North Carolina border. What began as a straightforward military strike by troops (including this region's 83rd Pa. Volunteers), deteriorated into a vicious foray against the local civilian population, fueled by copious amounts of confiscated whiskey. This was followed by brutal retaliatory murders of isolated Union stragglers. The malicious cycle then escalated into the burning of wide swaths of civilian homes and the wanton destruction of foodstuffs. It was war at its most brutal level. Historian George Deutsch will explore this little-known action, often from the point of view of local Erie soldiers who participated in the raid.

George Deutsch, B.A.

Historian and author George Deutsch is the Executive Director of the Erie County Historical Society, returning to Erie in June 2016. Over the last four years, the ECHS has experienced significant growth under Deutsch's leadership, purchasing and restoring two historic buildings and constructing a new exhibit building on its Hagen History Center campus. He has published several articles on the Civil War's 83rd Pennsylvania Volunteer Infantry and Commodore Oliver Hazard Perry's Flagship: Niagara from the War of 1812.: During the Civil War's Sesquicentennial, he was a contributor to the map/supplement for the Civil War issue of: National Geographic magazine. Deutsch is a leader in historical preservation and multiple public history projects, co-founding the Flagship Niagara League in 1980 and serving for many years on its Board of Trustees. That organization championed the reconstruction of the: Niagara, now Pennsylvania's official flagship, and the creation of the Erie Maritime Museum. He also spent several years on the Erie County Historical Society Board of Directors and co-founded both the Erie Civil War Roundtable and the Erie County Civil War Consortium, a non-profit educational organization. Deutsch helped to lead the efforts to restore and preserve Erie County's Civil War monument, the Erie-related monuments on the Gettysburg battlefield, and to conserve the two Civil War battle flags now in the Heritage Room at Erie's Blasco Library. Deutsch designed the wayside marker on Gettysburg's Little Round Top depicting Strong Vincent and Joshua Chamberlain. He annually teaches history courses at the Chautauqua Institution in New York, is a regular lecturer for the Jefferson Educational Society in Erie. and has led dozens of battlefield tours for roundtable and university groups. He has been honored twice by the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission and received the Local History Award in 2003 from the Erie County Historical Society. Deutsch has a degree in history from Mercyhurst University in Erie and was also educated at Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service. Currently, he is writing a new book on the famous 83rd Pennsylvania Infantry, focusing on the untold history of its last year in the Civil War: Raid, Murder and Retribution