

Upper Rappahannock River Front: The Dare Mark Line

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INTRODUCTION

Did the Rappahannock River matter in the Civil War?

General Fitzhugh Lee asserted in an 1879 speech: “Every country boasts its beautiful river. In France, the Seine... In England, the Thames... In Germany, the castle-lined Rhine.” General Lee continued, “In America, the Hudson, the Potomac and the Father of Waters; and yet their beauty and sublimity do not equal the Rappahannock... over which thousands of armed men crossed, and whose clear surface was crimsoned by the blood of heroes wrestling for supremacy along its banks.”¹

While General Fitz Lee’s assertion that Rappahannock River is without peer might simply offer Old Dominion hyperbole, it is an indisputable fact that more pitched infantry, artillery and cavalry battles were fought along the Rappahannock than any river in this country. No question.

Throughout the American Civil War, contending armies massed along the Rappahannock from the Blue Ridge to the Chesapeake, with Fauquier and Culpeper Counties situated on opposite banks—and with both Colonial-era counties ensconced squarely within the bloody vortex of threshold military campaigns.

The *epicenter* of this four-year drama in the Upper Rappahannock River Valley was the modest village of Rappahannock Station. It is undoubtedly the case that no town of its size witnessed the passage of more troops, more often—simply because the strategically vital Orange and Alexandria Railroad crossed the river at this vital railhead.²

¹ William J. Jones, et al, eds., *Southern Historical Society Papers*, (New York, 1977-80), Vol. 7, p. 561.

² The Virginia General Assembly chartered the Orange & Alexandria Railroad in 1848, and the line from Alexandria through Culpeper was completed in 1854. It was easily the most fought over railroad in Virginia. See Chuck Siegel’s outstanding website on the “O&A,” www.nvcc.edu/home/csiegel/

Nearby river fords³ were household names during the war as gleaned from newspaper accounts, reports and published maps. The monikers of Kelly's, Norman's, Beverly's, Freeman's, Sulphur Springs, Waterloo and Hinson's Fords were well known to families North and South as daily papers and maps were carefully perused for news from the front.⁴

And it is also an historical truism that the twenty-five mile portion of Fauquier and Culpeper Counties situated between Hinson's Mill Ford and Kelly's Ford on the Rappahannock River—and for about ten miles inland from the waterway—retains unique terrain integrity embodying the period 1861-1865. By and large, this historic piedmont landscape is largely unchanged since the war ended.⁵

Any Civil War soldier, Blue or Gray, who fought, camped and marched in western Fauquier and eastern Culpeper Counties would today instantly recognize his regiment's fighting or camping position. Indeed, the Rappahannock front is a mostly untainted Civil War field-laboratory where one can interpret the landscape just as John Pope strolled over it in 1862; or, as Jeb Stuart galloped upon it in 1863; and U.S. Grant railed through it in 1864 to take command of all United States armies.⁶

³ "Ford" is an Old English term designating a shallow place in a body of water where "man or beast can cross."

⁴ The Civil War spelling of Beverly's Ford is herein used, but the proper spelling is "Beverley," after Robert Beverley, an early landowner. Sulphur Springs Ford was also known as The Springs; White Sulphur Springs; or Fauquier Springs Ford. It is located just west of present-day Fauquier Springs Country Club. The original bridge supports (layered stone) remain in place on the Fauquier bank.

⁵ The Rappahannock originates from a bold spring at the foot of Chester Gap in the Blue Ridge, and the upper portion flows 62 miles to the "fall line" at Fredericksburg. The total length to the Chesapeake Bay is 184 miles. The name of the river is reportedly derived from an Algonquin phrase, "river of gentle rising water."

⁶ "Hell on the Rappahannock" was a tune made popular by Army of the Potomac bands. Described as a "lively number," it was "performed with blaring brasses and a tricky flourishing of drumsticks." John J. Pullen, *The Twentieth Maine* (Philadelphia, 1957), p. 171.

To understand the military importance of the land on both sides of the river, one must comprehend the strategic and tactical importance of the Rappahannock itself, simply because this marvelous waterway is the sum of all things that renders the surrounding historic landscape so uniquely significant.

An eminent historian asserts that the *Rappahannock River Line* "achieved a distinction in the eastern theater...as great as the Mississippi River in the west." Another historian notes the Rappahannock "played a significant role throughout the war in the strategic thinking and planning of the War Departments and military commanders on both sides." He adds, "the east-west river line afforded a ... strong military obstacle to cause difficulty for armies on the offensive, and conversely, to serve as a formidable aid for defending forces."⁷

In effect, one can accurately view the Rappahannock River as the outermost defense line of the Confederate capitol in Richmond, ninety miles to the south. Alternatively, if Confederates wished to invade Washington D.C., they must successfully breach the Rappahannock in any northern thrust. Either way, military commanders in the piedmont *must* deal with the Rappahannock in planning their deployments.

A recent study of battles along the Rappahannock offers that the Union high command believed that if the United States was to win the war, "a Federal army had to penetrate and establish itself south of that major waterway." After all, Richmond lay south of the river and many of the "food resources and railroads of northern Virginia also rested securely behind that barrier." But, "Most important..." this study concludes, "the Army of Northern Virginia ...resided below the Rappahannock," and "dared the Yankees to cross its river."⁸

And as Union officer Morris Schaff poignantly observed, the sylvan Rappahannock "holds the rich secrets of the struggle, for many a night the armies camped on (its) banks, and many a time crossed and re-

⁷ Edward J. Stackpole, *From Cedar Mountain to Antietam* (Harrisburg, 1959), pp. 27-28.

⁸ Daniel E. Sutherland, *Fredericksburg & Chancellorsville: The Dare Mark Campaign*, (Omaha, 1998), p. 1. The "Dare Mark Line" embodied a Confederate boast (threat) to the Federals to cross the river, "if they dare."

crossed...sometimes in victory... and in dismal defeat."⁹

It is a fact that hundreds—if not thousands—died along the steep banks of the "Dare Mark Line" from 1861-1865 as armies clashed for control of the Rappahannock. Indeed, one historian has termed the Upper Rappahannock, "Culpeper's defensive moat."

It is also true that the Second Manassas; Chancellorsville; Gettysburg; Bristoe Station and Overland Campaigns began along the upper Rappahannock. Further, a sharp action occurred at Freeman's Ford on August 22, 1862, wherein a Union Brigade was badly beaten, and its commander killed. Serious artillery duels occurred at Rappahannock Station in August 1862, and the huge Battle of Rappahannock Station on November 7, 1863, resulted in a disastrous Confederate defeat.

Now, *why* was this gentle farmland on both sides of Waterloo, Freeman's, Beverly's and Kelly's Fords so attractive to commanders?

Succinctly put, the open, rolling and unfenced terrain allowed officers the ability to quickly advance troops toward the waterway, while logistically facilitated by the Orange and Alexandria Railroad.

Further, an excellent road network east of the river, including the fabled Carolina Road—it crossed at Norman's Ford, a mile south of the bridge—allowed generals the means to swiftly advance field artillery and supply wagons toward the river.

And this next point cannot be over-emphasized: From Hinson's Mill south to Kelly's, *the bluffs on the Fauquier bank consistently command the terrain on the Culpeper side*. In other words, if I am General John Pope in August 1862, my plunging, converging artillery fire at Sulphur Springs Ford, Freeman's Ford, Beverly's Ford, Rappahannock Station and Mt. Holly Church Ridge overlooking Kelly's Ford, is going to smash Longstreet's guns across the river in Culpeper. And it certainly did.

⁹ Morris Schaff, *The Battle of the Wilderness* (Boston, 1910), p. 53.

If I am General Alfred Pleasonton leading 9,000 cavalry troopers to inaugurate the war's threshold military campaign (Gettysburg), then I will march the command to the high bluffs behind Beverly's and Kelly's Fords and *never be seen by the enemy* until my surprise attack toward Brandy Station on the morning of June 9, 1863.

And if I am the commander of the Army of the Potomac, I can boldly rush my command over alluvial, pancake-like ground and seize within minutes strong Confederate positions at Rappahannock Station and Kelly's Ford—just as Gen. George Meade accomplished on November 7, 1863.

But once a military commander arrived at the Rappahannock, he required good, solid fords allowing him to safely transfer his soldiers, artillery and wagons over the river. And in this regard, the "Requisition Book" of signal officer, Lt. Lemuel B. Norton, a Signal Corp officer reflects his field-surveys (1862) wherein he assessed, "Fords of the Rappahannock River." Lt. Norton described Beverly's Ford as "Good, crossed by roads, and Freeman's Ford, "*Best on the River.*"¹⁰

Now, what specifically happened at the Rappahannock during the war?

¹⁰ A copy of Lt. Lemuel Norton's detailed "Requisition Book," is in possession of the writer—courtesy of NPS, Fredericksburg. The owner (1985) is Mr. M.F. Von Leer, Palatine, IL. An excellent source for a commercial history of the river is "The Rappahannock Canal," by Donald S. Callahan (good Marine), Master of Arts Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of Arts & Sciences, The American University (1967).

Note:

Unapologetically, the forthcoming chronology conveys *special focus* on the 1862 actions along the river. This concentrated attention is necessary considering post-Cedar Mountain, August 1862 actions are chronically misunderstood; and yet to comprehend the importance of the Rappahannock as a defining military barrier, we must examine these complex, chess game-like maneuvers along the Rappahannock as Generals Robert E. Lee, Stonewall Jackson and John Pope sought tactical advantages.

Chronology of *Major* Military Actions on the Rappahannock River Line, Fauquier and Culpeper Counties

March/April 1862

Confederates withdraw from Centerville

Foreshadowing a two-year pattern, the Federals pursue

In early March 1862, General Joseph Johnston ordered his 70,000-man army—then at Centerville—to fall back on the Rappahannock “where it would be in a better position to defend Richmond.” The Manassas line was evacuated on March 9 and Southern forces withdrew along the line of the Orange & Alexandria Railroad into Culpeper from Freeman’s Ford to Kelly’s Ford.

General Richard Ewell’s Division of 8500 men remained at the river while Jeb Stuart’s cavalry brigade patrolled *east* of the river from Waterloo to Kelly’s Ford, and as far inland as Warrenton Junction—where Stuart established his headquarters.

In late March, General Samuel P. Heintzelman’s Third Corps swept through southwestern Fauquier toward the river, the first large Federal invasion to pound through Fauquier. Falling back before the enemy’s advance, Jeb Stuart’s horse soldiers ripped up railroad tracks and galloped over the river. The Federals attempted to cross the “medieval

moat” (as one officer called it), but Ewell burned the bridge on March 28, and a fierce artillery duel ensued.¹¹

Realizing the Confederates remained in force across the river, Heintzelman fell back to Warrenton Junction leaving a picket force at the river between Freeman’s and Kelly’s Fords. On April 17, General Ewell burned the railroad bridge and heaved artillery shells across the river at Heintzelman’s forces in an effort to mask his departure to join Stonewall Jackson in the Valley Campaign.¹²

July/August 1862

The “miscreant” John Pope invades, and “unable to distinguish between his headquarters and his hindquarters,” he vanishes. Second Manassas Campaign underway

Maj. Gen. John Pope assumed command of the newly christened Army of Virginia on June 27 and crafted plans to mount a massive new offensive in north-central Virginia. The new Federal army soon consolidated in western Fauquier County, 50,000-strong, and in early July, Union cavalry columns spanned out across the entire countryside east of the river, with Rappahannock Station in the center.¹³

¹¹ A good account of the bridge being burned on March 28 is found in O.O. Howard’s report, *War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*. 4 series in 70 vols., in 128 (Washington, D.C., 1880-1901), hereafter referred to as *OR*. See *OR*, 12, pt. 1, p. 412. This bridge would be burned and re-built more times than any major bridge in this country—as will be seen.

¹² There are a flurry of reports in *OR*, 12, pt. 1, pp. 412-417; 421; 422; 424-425; 443-445, dealing with skirmishes and patrols in March and April east of the river, in Fauquier, and at the railroad bridge. For a detailed summary of the *first* Federal patrol to take place south of the Rappahannock River (May 4, 1862), see, Maj. D. Porter Stowell’s report, *OR*, 12, pt. 1, pp. 451-55. He crossed, coming and going, at Beverly’s Ford. The First Maine Cavalry was proud to be the first Yankee invaders in Culpeper County. See, Edward P. Tobie, *History of the First Maine Cavalry* (Boston, 1887), pp. 61-64.

¹³ Post-Cedar Mountain, Pope calculated the size of his army at 45,000 in *OR*, pt. 3, p. 603. By the way, he noted, Kelly’s Ford “is one of the best on the river...” (Actually, he never visited Kelly’s Ford; so, his observation—like so much else about John Pope—was both second-hand, and deceptive. He was easily the most hated general by *both* armies.)

Pope ordered one of corps commanders to “throw forward your cavalry to Culpeper Court House,” and on July 3, Northern cavalry swept across the Rappahannock at Beverly’s Ford. Soon thereafter, on July 14, Pope ordered his large infantry command that had been camped back of the river from Freeman’s Ford south to Kelly’s Ford, to cross into Culpeper—the first invading force in Culpeper County. Pope re-built the railroad bridge at Rappahannock Station Ewell had burned.

Pope Retreats

At the Battle of Cedar Mountain on August 9, 1862, General Pope’s forces under Nathaniel Banks were defeated, and the Army of Virginia withdrew on August 18 back into Fauquier at Rappahannock Station.¹⁴

Once his forces safely retreated, Pope burned the railroad bridge—which he had just carefully rebuilt a month earlier. Pope’s artillery crowned the high ground at the railhead, and Yankee artillery lobbed shells into Culpeper County.¹⁵

Reacting to Pope’s retreat, General Robert E. Lee’s army moved into eastern Culpeper County fronting the river with Jackson’s command headed toward Beverly’s Ford, and with Longstreet filtering his command downriver toward Kelly’s Ford. On August 20, “the Rappahannock flowed between the hostile armies.”¹⁶

Informed by his cavalry that Pope’s defensive line anchored its right at Rappahannock Station, Lee ordered his cavalry on August 21 to charge across the river at both Beverly’s and Freeman’s Fords. They did so, and quickly secured Beverly’s Ford.¹⁷

¹⁴ The definitive study on Cedar Mountain is Robert K. Krick, *Stonewall Jackson at Cedar Mountain* (Chapel Hill, 1990).

¹⁵ A solid account of these actions at the river in August 1862 is to be found in John J. Hennessey, *Return to Bull Run: The Campaign and Battle of Second Manassas* (New York, 1993). Also see the aforementioned, Stackpole, *From Cedar Mountain to Antietam*. Lee’s total forces numbered about 63,000 soldiers

¹⁶ George H. Gordon, *History of the Campaign of the Army of Virginia Under John Pope* (Boston: 1880), p. 9. Although overlooked, this is a *very valuable book* (by a participant) that details fighting along the Rappahannock in August 1862.

¹⁷ General Beverly Robertson’s Brigade crossed at Freeman’s, while Tom Rosser’s 5th Virginia Cavalry, plus two cannon, crossed at Beverly’s Ford.

Suddenly aware his right flank at Beverly's Ford was in serious jeopardy, Pope instantly dispatched a portion of the command two miles upriver from the railhead. Suffering the impact of intense artillery fire from Yankee infantry, Jeb Stuart ordered a withdrawal back across Beverly's and Freeman's Fords.

Savage artillery battles now occurred back and forth over the Rappahannock, and considering the Federal artillery was positioned on superior bluffs in Fauquier, Pope's artillerists trumped in these hot duels. A "continuous and terrific" booming was heard (and felt) for miles up and down the river.

On August 22, a Union brigade (1500 men) commanded by Brig. Gen Henry Bohlen attacked across Freeman's Ford in the "Battle of Freeman's Ford"—a bold effort to uncover Confederate movements. The Federals were soundly defeated by two alert, rapidly responding Rebel brigades, with General Bohlen losing his life in the process.¹⁸

Also on August 22, Jeb Stuart and 1500 troopers moved upriver and crossed the upper Rappahannock at Waterloo and Hart's Fords. Proceeding through Warrenton and Auburn, Stuart swept behind Pope's lines in an effort to cut Pope's communications with Washington.

The ensuing "Catlett's Station Raid" was deemed a huge success: Many prisoners were taken and Pope's dispatches were seized. These captured papers confirmed General George McClellan was on his way from the Peninsula to reinforce Pope, and, "That knowledge was the turning point of the campaign." Concluding a job well done, Stuart recrossed the river at Warrenton Sulphur Springs.¹⁹

¹⁸ Isaac Trimble's report is in *OR*, 12, pt. 2, pp.718-720. Although the ambitious Trimble never admitted it, Hood's Brigade supported his brigade in this conclusive affair. See Hood's report, *OR*, 12, pt. 2, pp. 604-606.

¹⁹ Stuart's report is in *OR*, 12, pt. 2., pp. 729-733. The corresponding Federal report is Lt. Col. Thomas Kane, *OR*, 12, pt. 2, p. 400. (Give Kane credit for writing a candid report that begins, "I am sorry to report...") Pope's baggage train was situated in the yard of the Bailey Shumate house, no longer standing.

Confederate forces under General Jubal Early moved upriver on August 22, and in waning light, crossed into Fauquier County at Sandy Ford Dam. Isolated in Fauquier by rising water following a relentless storm on the night of the 22nd, Early's command hunkered down in the "Egyptian darkness."²⁰

Upon learning late at night on August 22 from his cavalry that Rebels crossed the river—again threatening his right flank—General Pope's ensuing orders early on the morning of August 23 to Sigel were unequivocal: "You will... march at once upon Sulphur Springs and thence toward Waterloo Bridge, attacking and beating the enemy wherever you find him."²¹

Fortuitously for the Southerners, however, the rain moderated, allowing Early's and Lawton's commands to escape from "inevitable destruction" (as Early put it) back into Culpeper County on August 24 via a hastily built bridge constructed at The Springs Ford.²²

Shortly thereafter, the *entire* Army of Northern Virginia crossed the Rappahannock into Fauquier at Hinson's Mill Ford, just beyond Waterloo, and the Second Manassas Campaign was fully underway.²³ Federal troops under Pope fell back from the Rappahannock toward the plains of Manassas, but not before they burned Stonewall Jackson's "temporary bridge" at Sulphur Springs on August 25.

²⁰ The 13th Georgia of Alexander Lawton's Brigade crossed on August 22 at The Springs Ford. Hays' Brigade was to follow Early on August 22, but darkness set in. Caught by darkness on the Culpeper side, Hays never crossed. Jackson's report is in *OR*, 12, pt. 2, pp. 41-48.

²¹ Franz Sigel's First Corps was situated between Freeman's Ford and Fox's Ford on August 22. See his report in *OR*, 12, pt. 3, p. 627. Sigel then moved up to Waterloo Bridge on August 24. See *OR*, 12, pt. 2, pp. 262-70. Pope's orders to Sigel are in *OR*, 12, pt. 2, p. 61.

²² Early's report is in *OR*, 12, pt. 2, pp. 705-717. He includes a description of this incident in his memoirs, *Jubal Anderson Early* (Wilmington, 1989), pp.106-13.

²³ Jackson crossed at Hinson's Mill on August 25; Longstreet (with Lee) forded at Hinson's on August 26. This writer has visited every ford on the Rappahannock, and Hinson's Mill Ford is a clear favorite. Described by one officer as "a hidden and difficult ford," and another as "picturesque," it is indeed all three. Hinson's Mill is the least well-known, significant ford on the Rappahannock.

October/November 1862

Confederates fallback after Antietam.

Burnside pursues and considers invading, but changes his mind. (Or, the battle that *wasn't* fought *here* and that was waged, *rather*, at Fredericksburg)

After the Battle of Antietam, Robert E. Lee ordered Confederate forces under General James Longstreet to retrograde through Fauquier County and re-cross the Rappahannock.²⁴ In late October, Longstreet's men swarmed over the river at various points centered on Rappahannock Station and fell back into Culpeper County—after re-building the railroad bridge Pope had earlier burned.

Pursuing the Confederates along the line of the Orange & Alexandria, the Army of the Potomac, now under General Ambrose Burnside (since November 7), seized Warrenton and began to probe river fords leading into Culpeper County. General Lee noted in a letter to President Davis on November 6, 1862, that the enemy was headed toward the Rappahannock with “their right moving along the base of the Blue Ridge, and their left resting on the Orange and Alexandria Railroad.”²⁵

Federal cavalry reached the Rappahannock River on November 7 at Rappahannock Station, and established strong positions in Fauquier at Beverly's, Freeman's, Hart's, Fox's and Sulphur Springs Fords.²⁶

²⁴ On October 30, 1862, General Lee ordered Longstreet's Corps to cross the Blue Ridge and proceed via Fauquier County to Culpeper County. See *OR*, 19, pt. 2, p. 686. Lee himself crossed the Rappahannock and entered Culpeper by November 6. See *OR*, 19, pt. 2, p. 697.

²⁵ *OR*, 19, pt. 2, p. 698. As the Federals marched through Fauquier, they found the “country...exhausted and the population hostile.” G.F. R. Henderson, *The Campaign of Fredericksburg* (London, 1898), p. 3. A soldier passing through Warrenton observed, “Neglect and decay (could be seen) everywhere.” George C. Rable, *Fredericksburg* (Chapel Hill, 2002), p. 32. Frank O'Reilly dives into deep, informative detail regarding Burnside's decision to shift his army downriver from the Upper Rappahannock, in *The Fredericksburg Campaign* (Baton Rouge, 2003), pp. 20-25.

²⁶ For a precise alignment of Federal positions on the Rappahannock after November 7, see Brig. Gen. George Bayard's report, *OR*, 21, p. 865.

Confronted by defiant Confederates in Culpeper, and preferring at any rate to shift his supply line from the Orange & Alexandria to the Aquia Creek & Fredericksburg line, General Burnside thought the better about trying to invade over the river at Rappahannock Station.

With President Lincoln approving the shift, “reluctantly,” General Burnside ordered the railroad bridge burned once more,²⁷ and the Army of the Potomac headed downriver on November 15 toward Falmouth—where, by the way, one could scarcely find a *worse* place to attack your enemy.

There was, after all, a *city* on the other side of the river, with Confederates stoutly entrenched behind said city, with high hills behind them—and *with artillery on those hills!* No such obstacle or high ground existed (then or now) across the river from Rappahannock Station, unless one considers the hamlet of Elkwood, which is *still* hard to find.²⁸

Almost concurrently, Lee directed his army downriver to Fredericksburg. Lee was profoundly surprised that Burnside fell back from Rappahannock Station and wrote the Secretary of War, “...it is plain that the enemy is abandoning his position... and does not intend to advance in the direction first assumed” (toward Culpeper).

²⁷ *OR*, 21, p. 765. This was the third time the railroad bridge at Rappahannock Station had been burned. It would not be the last.

²⁸ Loopy idea or not, there is actually a person who plans to build a “Civil War Williamsburg” directly across the river from Rappahannock Station. What a profoundly disrespectful notion... If it is built, “Civil War Williamsburg” will thoroughly destroy and denigrate a section of riverfront that witnessed the intense actions herein described. May this inappropriate project *never* see the light of day.

February/March 1863

First all-cavalry actions of the war at Kelly's Ford Confederates invaded north; they returned. Federals invaded south; they returned. And in the end, John Pelham died

A Confederate cavalry column of 400 troopers under General Fitzhugh Lee crossed Kelly's Ford on February 24, galloped up Mt. Holly Church Ridge, and on February 25 boldly attacked a Federal outpost at Hartwood Church. The Rebel raid was a complete success as Fitz Lee captured over 150 prisoners and galloped back to safety—badly damaging Yankee pride in the process. And less than a month later, the Federals returned the “favor.”²⁹

On March 17, a Union cavalry division under Brig. Gen. William Woods Averell responded to the debacle at Hartwood Church by advancing a division over the river, inaugurating the “Battle of Kelly's Ford,” the first major, all-cavalry fight of the war.

This tough, swirling fight saw Fitzhugh Lee's Brigade counter-attack the Union invaders, and in the process, Maj. John Pelham, the superb artilleryman was mortally wounded. Late in the day, Averell's command withdrew over Kelly's Ford, but not until after demonstrating that Federal troopers knew how to attack just as well as the Southern horse.³⁰

²⁹ Good accounts of the fight at Hartwood Church are in H.B. McClellan, *The Campaigns of Maj. Gen. J.E.B. Stuart* (Boston, 1885), and Eric J. Wittenberg, *The Union Cavalry Comes of Age* (Washington, D.C. 2003).

³⁰ For a succinct “Battle of Kelly's Ford” overview, see John W. Thomason, Jr., *Jeb Stuart* (New York, 1930).

April 1863

Chancellorsville Campaign underway at Kelly's Ford "Mr. Fighting Joe Hooker" targets the Upper Rappahannock

In a giant pincer-like movement designed by Army of the Potomac Commanding General Joseph Hooker—the *fourth* Union commander to confront the Upper Dare Mark Line—three Federal infantry corps (5th; 11th and 12th) comprising the Federal right wing—about 42,000 men, crossed into Culpeper on April 28 at Kelly's Ford to initiate the Chancellorsville Campaign.³¹

They were unimpeded in their crossing as Confederate cavalry pickets "pulled back and let them go wherever they wanted to go," But in performing their duties as scouts, Rebel cavalry alerted General Lee at Fredericksburg that Yankees—lots of them—were now on his left flank.

Concurrent with Hooker's bold offensive action, 10,000 Federal cavalry troopers under General George Stoneman also crossed at Kelly's Ford on April 29, *behind* the infantry—not the proper place for cavalry—in connection with "Stoneman's Raid," a cavalry action conducted concurrently (and benignly) with the Chancellorsville Campaign.

The three Union infantry corps crossed out of Culpeper at the Rapidan on April 29 over Germanna's and Ely's Fords, and headed toward their fate at the little crossroads village of Chancellorsville.

³¹ Revealing the importance General Hooker placed on ensuring that his Kelly's Ford maneuver would be successful, the commanding general *personally* accompanied the Right Wing section. See Stephen W. Sears, *Chancellorsville* (Boston, 1996), p.147.

June/July 1863

The Battle of Brandy Station

Gettysburg Campaign begins, and ends, at the Rappahannock

The Gettysburg Campaign opened when the Cavalry Corps of the Army of the Potomac (9,000 troopers) approached the Rappahannock from Warrenton Junction, and attacked over Beverly's and Kelly's Fords on June 9. The "Battle of Brandy Station," inaugurated the largest cavalry battle of the war (20,000 troops engaged) and signified the opening of the Pennsylvania Campaign—both matters of no small distinction.³²

Following this all-day battle, Federal cavalry withdrew over the river and picketed the river while awaiting the next move. That move—the most momentous of the entire war—would soon come.

Beginning June 10, General Dick Ewell's Corps headed north for Chester Gap, with Longstreet's Corps and Stuart's cavalry division advancing into Fauquier County on June 15 at upstream fords on the Rappahannock, including Hinson's Mill Ford.³³

For a period of about six weeks in June and July 1863, both armies abruptly abandoned the Rappahannock River Line as they engaged in the weightiest campaign of the war throughout Adams County, Pennsylvania. But when that awesome battle concluded, can the reader now guess as to *where* both armies returned?

Answer: Almost as if responding to some gigantic gravitational pull, both armies soon occupied opposite banks of the Rappahannock River. Indeed, following their defeat at the Battle of Gettysburg, the vanquished Confederate army (50,000 men) retreated in late July back across the Rappahannock River into Culpeper County.³⁴

³² The two best participant accounts of the battle are, H. B. McClellan, *The Campaigns of Stuart's Cavalry*, and Heros von Borcke and Justus Scheibert, *Die Gross Reiterschlacht bei Brandy Station, 9. Juni 1863* (Berlin, 1893).

³³ For a detailed, day-by-day account of the Confederate invasion toward Pennsylvania, see "Clark B. Hall, The Army is Moving: Lee's March to the Potomac" (*Blue and Gray Magazine*, Spring, 2004).

³⁴ Lee, with Longstreet's Corp crossed the Rappahannock into Culpeper on July 24. See *OR*, 27, pt. 2, p. 304.

August 1863

Federal cavalry attacks. Confederate infantry abandons the Rappahannock. Jeb Stuart's troopers remain in Culpeper

With Gen. George Meade's army massed in the vicinity of Warrenton, Union cavalry under General John Buford launched a daring attack across Beverly's Ford and at Rappahannock Station on August 1. Unaware of his enemy's intentions and apparently rattled that Yankee cavalry had so boldly crossed the river, General Lee retreated his infantry south of the Rapidan on August 3/4, while leaving Stuart's cavalry behind in Culpeper.³⁵

Following their cavalry, the Army of the Potomac moved up to the Rappahannock from Warrenton and established a strong line *in Fauquier* from Waterloo to Kelly's Ford. Soldiers on both sides wondered what Meade planned to do. Why did he stop at the river, they puzzled? Was he going to going to sustain the momentum of his Gettysburg victory with an aggressive thrust across the Rappahannock?

Bizarrely not following up on an advantage provided by his aggressive cavalry, Meade withdrew his cavalry over from Culpeper, and instead of driving back Southern cavalry, the Blue horsemen proceeded to picket the flanks of the infantry along the river. What was going on?

Well, this sudden inertia was actually nothing more than Washington officials deciding they knew what was best for the Army of the Potomac—a very frequent occurrence in the Lincoln Administration.

The decision *not* to advance across the Rappahannock in early August was in fact rendered by President Abraham Lincoln. Not entirely trusting General Meade, President Lincoln conveyed orders instructing Meade to maintain the line of the Rappahannock while “assuming a threatening attitude toward the enemy.” (Whatever that means.)³⁶

³⁵ For Buford's account of his river crossing see *OR*, 27, pt. 1, pp. 931-932. Lee's account is in *OR*, 27, pt. 2, p. 324.

³⁶ See Meade's report in *OR*, 29, pt. 1, pp. 8-11. President Lincoln had been so poorly served, successively, by Generals Pope, McClellan and Burnside that one imagines he was justified in keeping a close eye on George Meade. But in early August, Meade

Camping quietly (not threateningly) in Fauquier for six weeks while waiting for *somebody* in Washington to make a command decision, Union soldiers noted with astonishment that dozens of slaves (“contrabands”) crossed the Rappahannock into Fauquier from Waterloo, and all the way down to Kelly’s Ford. An officer counted 40 slave children in one night that dashed over the Rappahannock Station from the neighborhood around the bridge.³⁷

September 1863

Meade invades Culpeper County; Rebel cavalry expunged

In early September 1863—after having been forced to remain inactive at the Rappahannock for six weeks—General Meade learned through his intelligence operatives that Longstreet’s Corps was being withdrawn from Lee’s army and sent west to reinforce Confederate forces in Tennessee. Meade then boldly made the command decision (himself) to invade across the Rappahannock into Culpeper County in an effort to unmask his enemy’s activities.

On September 13, 1863, the next invasion across the river began as the Army of the Potomac’s Cavalry Corps “crossed the Rappahannock at several points,” followed by the 2nd Corps, in support. Finding only Jeb Stuart’s cavalry at their front—Ewell’s Corps had remained south of the Rapidan—this huge Federal force lost little time in driving Stuart back over the Rapidan and taking control of Culpeper County.

General Meade then moved his entire army—90,000 men—into Culpeper on September 16, with headquarters at Culpeper Court House. But once he got into Culpeper, he discovered that Lee—with 50,000 soldiers—had no intention of falling back toward Richmond.

finally had Lee on the run after the Confederates pulled back from the Rappahannock and one wonders how the war might have played out if Meade had advanced over the river and attacked Lee, as he wanted to do. See Freeman Cleaves, *Meade of Gettysburg* (Norman, 1960), pp. 190-191.

³⁷ For a precise description of the Federal positions at the river on August 1, see *OR*, 27, pt. 3, pp. 793-794.

As Meade put it, “I made the advance I did under the belief that Lee...would...if threatened, retire to Richmond.” But almost as if his feelings were hurt, Meade petulantly noted, “I find, however, he evinces no disposition to do so.”³⁸

So again, the Army of the Potomac entered a stage of prolonged inactivity, except this time, Culpeper County—rather than Fauquier—“came under the heel of an invader.”

But, as always happens in war, as in life, things do change. And it was the Confederates who altered the status quo.

October 1863

Bristoe Station Campaign

Lee attacks north across the Rappahannock; Federals withdraw

Lee retreats back to the river

Federals pursue toward the Rappahannock (for the last time)

Not liking for one minute that his enemy occupied Culpeper County just across the Rapidan, Robert E. Lee thrust his cavalry in motion north on October 10, and now with Jeb Stuart asserting, “turn-about is fair play,” it came time for Rebel cavalry to hurl back the Yankee horse.

Behind their re-invigorated troopers, the Army of Northern Virginia advanced into Culpeper, with a satisfied General Lee writing to the Secretary of War, “I have the honor to inform you that General Meade’s army has been compelled to retire north of the Rappahannock by the movements of this army on his right flank.”³⁹

Indeed, not wanting to be trapped with their backs to the river, the Federals withdrew into Fauquier on October 11. Lee’s army then crossed into Fauquier at Sulphur Springs on October 12 and the Bristoe Station Campaign was underway. But before the Federals withdrew,

³⁸ George Gordon Meade, ed., *The Life and Letters of George Gordon Meade* (New York, 1913), Vol. 2, p. 150.

³⁹ *OR*, 29, pt. 1, p. 406.

they of course burned the railroad bridge at Rappahannock Station—and for the *fourth* time, this roughly treated bridge was destroyed.⁴⁰

Following the crushing defeat at Bristoe Station on October 14, Lee directed his army to fall back through Fauquier along the Orange & Alexandria to the Rappahannock, where on October 20, he again took up a defensive position on the river, centered at Rappahannock Station.

Emboldened by their victory, the Army of the Potomac followed right behind Lee, re-building the railroad tracks, as they again pushed toward the Rappahannock.

And another Federal triumph was soon in the offing.

November 1863

Battle of Rappahannock Station

“General Meade means to fight...”

“The saddest chapter in the history of this army...”

As Lee fell behind the Rappahannock after the defeat at Bristoe Station, the commanding general made plans to winter his 50,000 veterans in Culpeper County. Orders carried for winter lodges to be built, and General Lee even saw his own hut erected, situated just south of the river—which he called, “Camp Rappahannock.” Lee wrote his wife, “Genl. Meade... I presume will come on again. If I could only get some shoes & clothes for the army, I would save him the trouble.”⁴¹

Well, as it turned out, General Meade did indeed “come on again,” as on November 7, 1863, the *entire* Army of the Potomac, over 100,000 strong, fanned out over the southwestern Fauquier countryside and attacked Lee’s army at both Rappahannock Station and Kelly’s Ford in an (underrated) action termed, “The Battle of Rappahannock Station.”

⁴⁰ Stuart’s cavalry threw back David Gregg at Fox’s Mill, and Stuart crossed at The Springs. *OR*, 29, pt. 1, p. 407. To recall, Ewell first burned the bridge; then Pope; then Burnside; and now Meade—who, according to Lee, blew up “one of the piers.”

⁴¹ Clifford Dowdy and Louis H. Manarin, *The Wartime Papers of R.E. Lee* (New York, 1961), pp. 615-616.

This savage, courageous, evening attack against a strong Confederate Fortification (*tete de pont*) at Rappahannock Station resulted in heavy Southern losses—the greater part of two brigades, more than 2000 men, a triumph achieved with light Union casualties (419).⁴²

After their third successive defeat—Gettysburg; Bristoe Station; and now Rappahannock Station—the Army of Northern Virginia turned their backs to their old enemy, and to the Rappahannock River.

November 8

The battle that did *not* occur—but, if it had, the war could have been over in Culpeper County

On the morning of November 8, the *entire* Army of the Potomac, from Beverly's Ford to Kelly's Ford, entered Culpeper—and in one battle line, six miles long—faced toward Culpeper Court House.

A few miles to the south, the *entire* Army of Northern Virginia drew up in a battle front extending from Pony Mountain on the right to Chestnut Fork (Catalpa), on the left—a line that was five miles long.⁴³

Showing his extreme reluctance to yield Culpeper County without a fight, General Lee briefly offered battle to his opponent. Meade did not respond to the offer. Both armies then maintained their respective positions, and *nothing happened*, for a full day (Sunday, November 8).

Not at all liking his defensive position, General Lee withdrew his army from Culpeper, and crossed the Rapidan on the night of November 8. And in so doing, the Confederates *forever* ceded the Upper Rappahannock River Line to the Army of the Potomac. Never again in his life did Robert E. Lee cross the Upper Rappahannock River.

⁴² An honest account of this battle is in Douglas Southall Freeman's, *Lee's Lieutenants: Gettysburg to Appomattox* (New York, 1944), Vol. 3, pp. 264-269. For a tight account of the "Right Column" attack at Rappahannock Station, see General John Sedgwick's report, *OR*, 29, pt. 1., pp. 574-575. For coverage of the action from a regimental perspective, see James P. Gannon's excellent, *Irish Rebels: Confederate Tigers* (Campbell, CA, 1998), pp. 203-220.

⁴³ See Lee's interesting map sketching this battle line, *OR*, 29, pt. 1, p. 614.

December 1863-May 1864

The Army of the Potomac's winter encampment along the Rappahannock

After the Mine Run Campaign (Nov. 26-Dec. 1), the Army of the Potomac—its rolls soon climbed to 120,000 men—camped in Fauquier and Culpeper Counties for five successive months.

The Union 5th Corps, 20,000 men, built their hut sites directly at the Rappahannock, in Fauquier County, and their picket lines and hut-sites covered the ground from Freeman's to Kelly's Fords. The 5th Corps Headquarters of Maj. Gen. George Sykes were at "Ellenslea," located about two miles north of Rappahannock Station.⁴⁴

The 5th Corps also retained the enormous responsibility of protecting the Orange & Alexandria Railroad all the way back to Alexandria, and soldiers rode the rail cars and manned block houses constructed at critical intersections in Fauquier County.

The 2nd Cavalry Division, Army of the Potomac, Brig. David Gregg commanding, had its headquarters in Warrenton.⁴⁵ General Gregg was responsible for protecting the rear of the army, and he had the toughest job of any officer during the winter, as it was his fate to combat the highly aggressive, effective partisan warfare waged by one John Singleton Mosby. (The irrepressible Mosby fought winter *or* summer—his Rangers did *not* take vacations.)

During this threshold winter encampment, the Army of Potomac reorganized, consolidating five infantry corps into three—with the depleted 1st and 3rd Corps merging into the 2nd, 5th and 6th Corps command structures—amidst considerable grumbling in the ranks from those soldiers who lost their unit identity.

⁴⁴ This house, no longer standing, was the home of William Bowen..

⁴⁵ Gregg's headquarters were at Virginia Governor William "Extra Billy's" house, located on the west edge of Warrenton. This splendid home, formerly known as "Monterosa," is today, "Neptune Lodge," and still stands.

Complaints aside over administrative shifts, the most important change affecting the army—and the future of the war—happened in March 1864 when Lt. Gen. U.S. Grant assumed command of all United States armies. Soon thereafter, the new “General-in Chief” made his headquarters in the field with the Army of the Potomac, a most fateful decision.

In April 1864, General Grant railed through Fauquier County, past Rappahannock Station, and unceremoniously set up headquarters five miles from General George Meade. And demonstrating decisiveness never before witnessed in the Eastern Theater of War, Grant made immediate plans to depart the Rappahannock Line forever.⁴⁶

May 1864 **Overland Campaign**

“The army will move on Wednesday, May 4, 1864.” So began Meade’s orders to his troops on May 2. Grant instructed Meade and other army commanders throughout the country to move against the enemy simultaneously, giving strategic unity to the Union war effort for the first time.⁴⁷

And on May 4, the Army of the Potomac departed the Upper Rappahannock River Line, forever, and soon crossed the Rapidan, entering a dark and foreboding place appropriately called, “The Wilderness.”

⁴⁶ For a comprehensive overview of this winter encampment, see Clark B. Hall, “Season of Change: The Winter Encampment of the Army of the Potomac” (*Blue and Gray Magazine*, April 1991).

⁴⁷ *OR*, 36, pt. 2, pp. 331-332.

Arrival of United States Colored Troops

In a benign-sounding report written by Brig. Gen. Edward Ferrero, 4th Division, 9th Corps, General Ferrero writes, “In compliance with orders, the division broke camp at Manassas Junction, VA. on the 4th day of May...to join the Army of the Potomac.”

And *what is the significance* of this seemingly innocuous introduction to a battle report?

Here it is:

The Army of the Potomac was joined on May 5, 1864, by the 3100 United States Colored Troops of General Edward Ferrero’s Division, Burnside’s Ninth Corps. This historic linkage took place *at Kelly’s Ford*, on the Rappahannock River when U.S.C.T’s crossed the river on a pontoon bridge built specifically for them by the Army of the Potomac’s engineers.

Shortly thereafter, General Ferrero reported that in the Battle of the Wilderness, he “ordered the colored regiments to advance on the enemy in line of battle, which they did, and drove the enemy in perfect rout.”⁴⁸

So for the first time in American history, black troops fought alongside white troops—and *this historic connection was made at the Rappahannock River*.

⁴⁸ OR, 36, pt. 1, pp. 987-991.

Question Answered

At the outset of this paper, we asked if the Rappahannock River mattered in the Civil War?

By now, the reader has reached his own conclusion...

Clark B. Hall
President
Brandy Station Foundation

March 6, 2011
At Middleburg