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RELEASE 06-09
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

May 14, 2009

Blockade

Confederates use Hospital Point to cut off Washington

From eight batteries in the Quantico area, with the two largest and most fortified located at what is now Marine Corps Base Quantico's Hospital Point, the Confederate States of America virtually blockaded the Potomac River to commercial shipping creating hardship, inconvenience and embarrassment for Washington, D.C., in 1861 and 1862.

"For a period of nearly five months, despite the erection of over 40 Union forts to protect the capital city, and the deployment of thousands of men and a flotilla of ships, the Confederacy cut off all access to Washington from the sea," wrote Joseph Mitchell, author of *Decisive Battles of the Civil War* and *Military Leaders of the Civil War*. "By order of the United States Navy, ships were prohibited from attempting to use the Potomac River to bring supplies to the Capital for fear they would be destroyed by the Confederate forts and batteries blockading the river."

According to retired Marine Lieutenant Colonel Ron Smith, a member of the Historical Commission for Prince William County, the town of Quantico, Va., was then known as Evansport, and the spit of land where the headquarters for Marine Corps Systems Command (MCSC) now stands was called Shipping Point.

"What happened here for a few short months during the Civil War is very significant," Smith said. "What could have happened here might have shortened the duration of the war."

What did happen here is not as well known as Gettysburg or the historic battles that took place near Fredericksburg, Va., but Smith said that with a bit of digging, the history of the area can be uncovered. According to the book *Quantico: Semper Progredi, Always Forward* by Bradley Gernand and Michelle Krowl, "Evansport seemed an ideal location for river batteries as the Potomac River narrows at that point ... General Robert E. Lee concurred on Evansport's strategic worth in August 1861, and ordered the erection of batteries there." The first battery (an earthen fort with one or more gun placements) was ready for service on Sept. 29 and another on Oct. 9.

“Most of the work was done at night behind a shield of trees,” said Mary Alice Wills in her book *The Confederate Blockade of Washington, D.C., 1861-1862*. “In spite of being on the river’s edge, they were so cautious their activity went undetected by the U.S. Navy.”

That is until the South started shelling their ships. The U.S. Navy had created a Potomac Flotilla and placed Captain Thomas Craven as its Commander. Once the flotilla ships came under fire, the Union started to worry.

“So long as the batteries stand at Shipping Point and Evansport the navigation of the Potomac will effectively be closed,” Craven reported to Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles, according to Wills. On Oct. 17 Craven recommended that no more government stores be sent to Washington via the Potomac until the batteries were removed or silenced.

Soon after George McClellan became the General-in-Chief of the U.S. Army in November 1861, he sent General Joseph Hooker with 8,000 men and three field batteries of 18 guns to southern Maryland, directly across the Potomac river from the Confederate’s Virginia batteries. Hooker used aerial observations, information gathered by balloon ascents, to devise plans of operations and attacks on the batteries.

“Three plans to attack the batteries were made by General Hooker,” Smith said. “All were rejected by McClellan.”

According to Gernand and Krowl, Welles largely blamed McClellan for the debacle on the river, saying he allowed “the closing of the only avenue from the National Capital to the ocean.”

The co-authors wrote that people found it difficult to understand how Washington could become the only besieged northern city with an army of 210,000 men, armed, equipped and in an apparent state of readiness, encamped within the city and a flotilla of U.S. Navy ships on the Potomac River.

“Every resident of the Capital immediately felt the effects of the blockade through a general increase in commodity prices and lack of some less essential provisions,” Wills said. “The prices of coal and wood became astronomical. The trains, after the Potomac was closed, could not meet the demand for fuel.”

According to Wills, the only factor that prevented the blockade from being catastrophic was the single line railroad connection through the state of Maryland to Baltimore, Washington’s only other link to the North. “The importance of Maryland’s remaining in the Union was brought home when the Confederates blockaded the Potomac River,” she said. “Had Maryland seceded, a complete rather than partial blockade would have befallen the Federal Capital.”

The railroad, however, managed the supply of Washington satisfactorily. “Although it caused inconvenience, the blockade did not result in any catastrophic suffering,” Wills wrote. “It did cause mental anguish and can be regarded as an early example of psychological warfare.”

That anguish may have been heightened by the fact that rebel batteries actually did very little damage. According to historians, more than 5,000 shots were fired by Confederate guns during the blockade, but few rounds found their mark.

“Regardless of the extent of actual damage inflicted on the Potomac Flotilla and other vessels which attempted to outrun the Confederate batteries, the true measure of the success of the Confederate blockade of the Potomac was the psychological toll it took on the Union for five months,” Gernand and Krowl said.

This toll extended to elected officials. The Congressional Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War found the Potomac blockade most irritating. Wills wrote that in addition to the inconvenience and humiliation it caused, representations had been made to the committee by New York businessmen and U.S. citizens abroad of the “disgrace they felt and the contempt in which the United States was held in foreign countries for allowing its Capital to be blockaded.”

The committee, along with Secretary of War Edwin Stanton and President Abraham Lincoln, were “furious, indignant and greatly disillusioned with McClellan,” Wills said.

Lincoln ordered McClellan to take action, but before an operation was launched, “the Confederates at Evansport disappeared – almost overnight,” Gernand and Krowl wrote.

According to Wills, General Joseph Johnston, Commander of Confederate Forces in Northern Virginia, had about 40,000 men at his command, much fewer than McClellan. “Realizing the Confederate vulnerability and expecting to be attacked at any time after mid-February, he selected a new line of defense for the Army of Northern Virginia along the southern bank of the Rappahannock River,” the author wrote.

Because unusual activity was observed on the Maryland side of the river, “Johnston accelerated the speed of his evacuation, ordering his troops to take whatever they could carry and destroy the rest,” Gernand and Krowl stated. “This order included the batteries along the Potomac near Evansport.”

“At that time weather was terrible,” Smith added. “It rained for days prior to the withdrawal. Roads were not passable, and the Confederates couldn’t carry supplies or equipment through the thick mud. So they spiked guns, burned supplies and buried personal effects.”

March 7 to 9 witnessed Confederates on the Potomac setting fire to their batteries and sabotaging the guns left behind. According to Wills, Lieutenant R.H. Wyman, who had assumed command of the flotilla in December, telegraphed the Secretary of the Navy on March 9, 1862... “Cockpit and Shipping Point batteries have been abandoned; they have been shelled for an hour without reply. The enemy has set fire to everything at Shipping Point, and frequent explosions give evidence to the destruction of ammunition.”

Finally able to see the garrisons in person, Wyman discovered them to be “of a much more formidable nature than I had supposed, and great labor has been expended in their construction,” according to Gernand and Krowl. Shipping Point’s guns included one weighing 9,068 pounds, a long 32-pounder weighing 6,200 pounds, two 6-inch rifled guns, six long 42-pounders and a 7½-inch rifled gun weighing 10,759 pounds.

The next day, men from Hooker’s Division visited Shipping Point, which turned out to be the most heavily fortified, according to Wills. They found 16 guns. “Three of them, white oak Quakers (made of wood), were obviously designed to fool the balloon observers,” the author wrote. “Four other guns had burst during the winter. Care had been taken to destroy the remainder of the guns, which had to be abandoned because of the wet conditions of the roads.” Some were saved by the Federal troops and acquired by the North. One of those guns still exists today and can be found displayed on Neville Heights overlooking the town of Quantico.

Wills said Colonel Charles Wainwright, Hooker’s Chief of Artillery, was surprised to see how well the Shipping Point batteries were built. “They were at least half sunk in the bank and from 15 to 50 feet thick making it impossible for the gunboats to injure them,” the author wrote. “The magazines were cut into the solid bank. The gunners were screened by bomb-proofs, and their sleeping compartments sunk several feet in the ground. There was a good supply of cannonballs, canister and grapeshot, and shells. Rifle pits and breastworks covered the areas adjacent to the batteries.”

According to Smith, one Shipping Point battery stood where the east wing of MCSC’s Building 2200 is now. The other was only about 300 yards to the south. As he walks around the area, he can’t help but wonder what might have been if McClellan had tried to take out these batteries. Could it have shortened the Civil War?

Wills has her opinion. “If a campaign against them had been launched, the Confederates would have abandoned the batteries,” she wrote. “Opening the Potomac River during the winter of 1861-1862 would have provided the Union with a great moral boost. It would have had a beneficial effect on the morale of the troops, and the spirit of the country, as well as bolstering the position of U.S. diplomats abroad in winning support for the Union’s cause.”

By Bill Johnson-Miles, MCSC Corporate Communications

Sidebar (Recommend placing in a box within the story, maybe shaded, near the first mention of General Hooker)

Hooker's Division

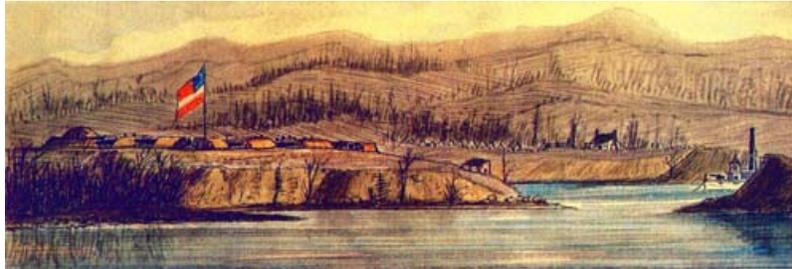
When Hooker's men made camp in Maryland directly across the Potomac River from where MCSC is now, there was no fighting happening, and the winter was a long cold time for the troops. According to Smith, the General would send his wagons on Friday each week to Washington to bring girls down to entertain the troops. "Residents of D.C. nicknamed them Hooker's Division," Smith said. "Once the war moved on, the term 'hooker' was retained."



Retired Marine Lieutenant Colonel Ron Smith, a member of the Historical Commission for Prince William County, points to the location of where one of the Shipping Point Confederate batteries once stood. The battery would have extended from about this point on Quantico's Hospital Point to the end of Marine Corps Systems Command's Building 2200's east wing. *(Photo by Bill Johnson-Miles)*



Retired Marine Lieutenant Colonel Ron Smith, a member of the Historical Commission for Prince William County, believes this cannon on Marine Corps Base Quantico's Neville Heights could have easily been one of the many used at the Confederate's Shipping Point batteries to blockade the Potomac River. *(Photo by Bill Johnson-Miles)*



This Potomac River view of a Confederate battery at Shipping Point was illustrated by Army Private Robert Sneden of the Union in 1862. *(Art courtesy of Ron Smith)*



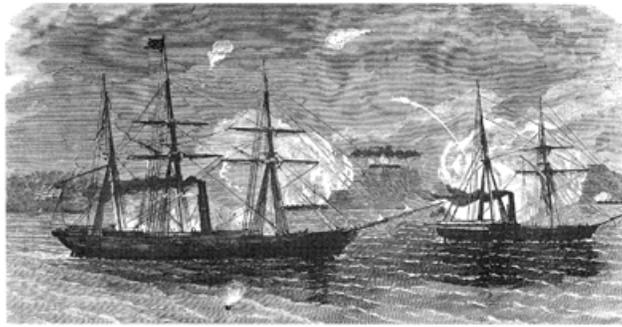
This Quantico Creek view of a Confederate battery at Shipping Point was illustrated by Army Private Robert Sneden of the Union in 1862. *(Art courtesy of Ron Smith)*



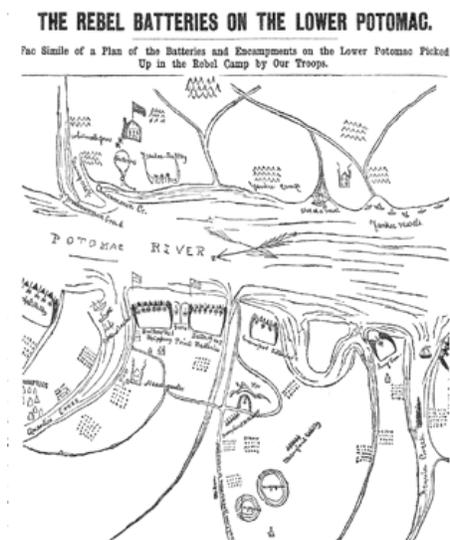
This Union map was illustrated by Army Private Robert Sneden in 1862. Shipping Point and Evansport are located in the bottom left corner. What is called a fort at Shipping Point was actually a rebel battery. (Art courtesy of Ron Smith)



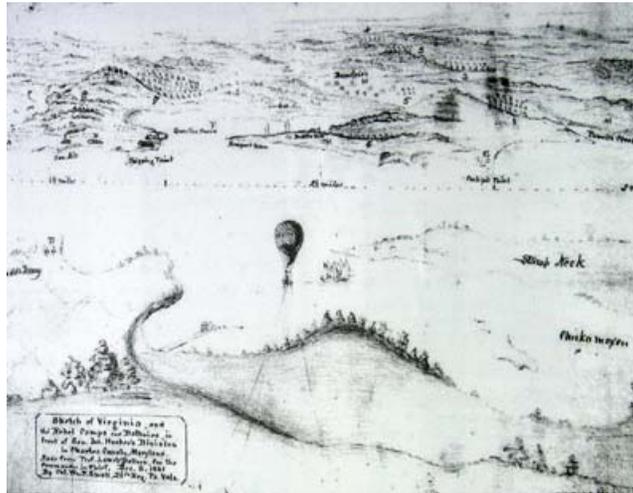
This close-up of the Union map illustrated by Army Private Robert Sneden in 1862 shows Shipping Point. What is called a fort at Shipping Point was actually a rebel battery. (Art courtesy of Ron Smith)



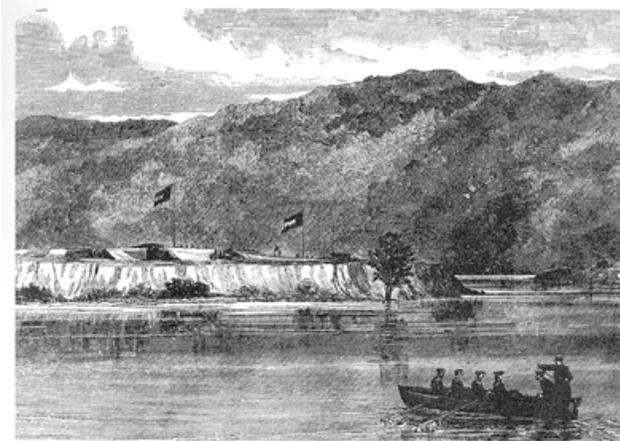
This engraving shows the *USS Seminole* and *USS Pocahontas* of the Potomac Flotilla engaging Confederate batteries at Shipping Point. (*Harper's History of the Great Rebellion*)



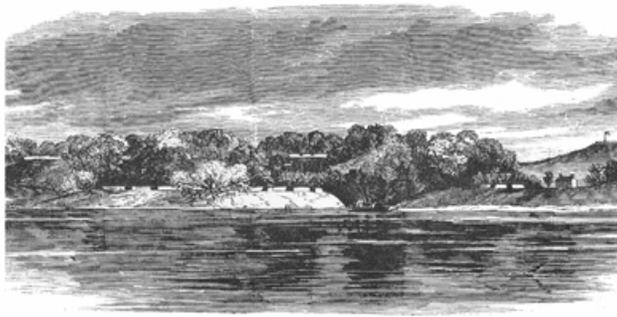
This front page map, published in the *New York Herald* on March 17, 1862, was discovered by Union troops after the Confederates abandoned their batteries at Shipping Point.



A portion of a map drawn on Dec. 8, 1861, by Colonel William Small, 26th Pennsylvania Infantry, from the balloon *Constitution*, shows Confederate batteries, camps and terrain in Virginia from Chopawamsic Creek to Freestone Point, including Shipping Point, the present-day site of Quantico's Hospital Point. A framed poster-size print of the entire map is located on the Quarterdeck near the front entrance of Building 2200, Marine Corps Systems Command Headquarters.



This engraving of the Confederate battery at Shipping Point was printed in *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*.



This engraving shows the extensive system of fortifications linking Confederate batteries to Evansport, the present day town of Quantico. (*Harper's History of the Great Rebellion*)

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