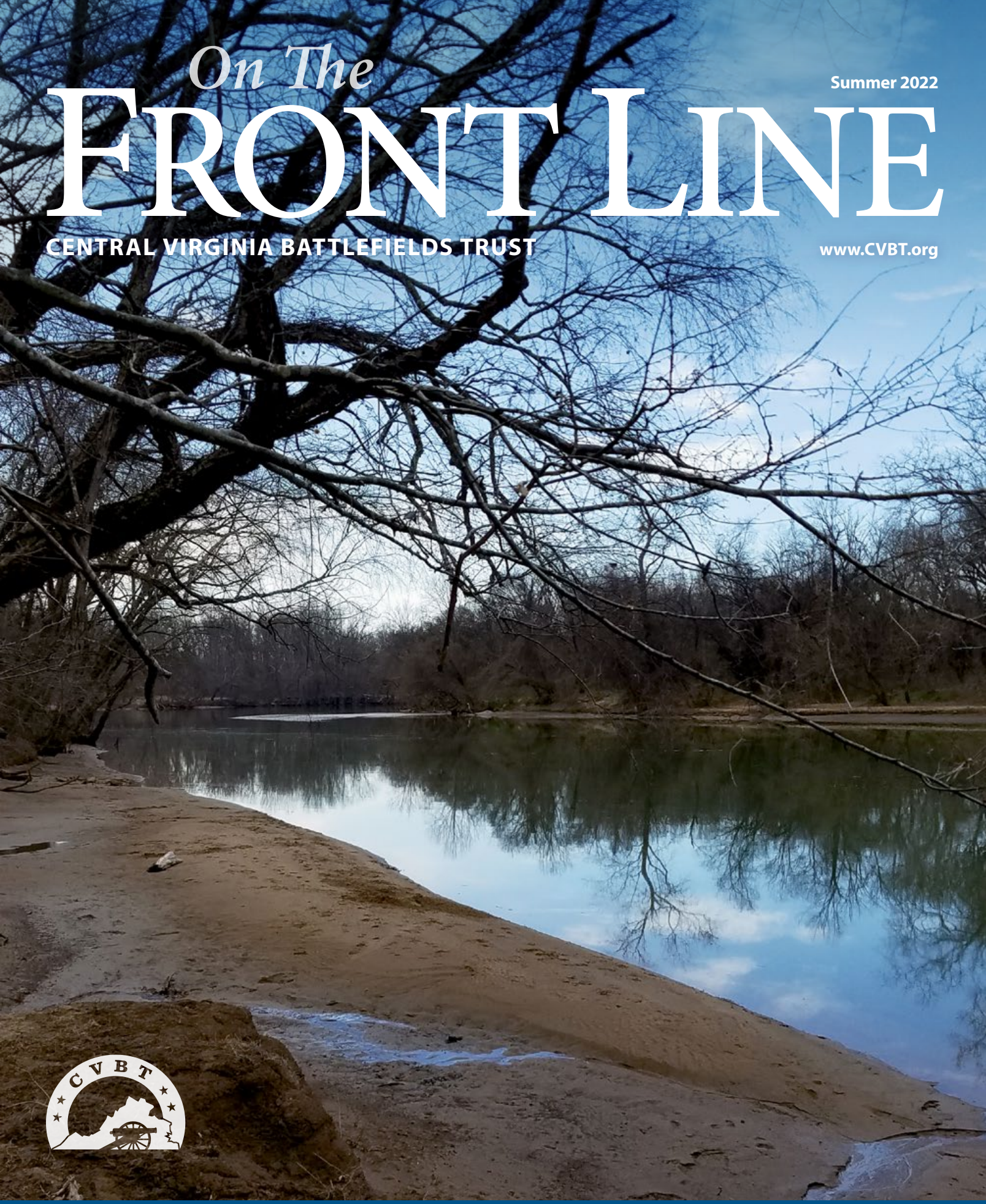

On The FRONT LINE

Summer 2022

CENTRAL VIRGINIA BATTLEFIELDS TRUST

www.CVBT.org

CROSSING THE RAPPAHANNOCK

Central Virginia Battlefields Trust

CVBT: On The Front Line is published semi-annually as a partnership communication for the Central Virginia Battlefields Trust at P.O. Box 3417, Fredericksburg, VA 22402. Contact CVBT at 540-374-0900 or www.cvbt.org.

The CVBT is chartered as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization preserving land associated with the four major Civil War campaigns of Fredericksburg, Chancellorsville, The Wilderness, and Spotsylvania Court House.

All contributions are tax deductible. A financial statement is available, upon request, from the Virginia Office of Consumer Affairs.

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Cover Photo:
The tide is down at Franklin's Crossing on the Rappahannock River. *Terry Rensel*

Dispatch from the President

As with any company or organization, members and associates retire or relocate. CVBT is no different. Earlier this year, our Government Relations board member, Jack Blalock, relocated to Alabama to take on more responsibility in his professional life, therefore necessitating his retirement from the CVBT Board. We thank Jack for all his tireless work while with CVBT and wish him well.

Linda Wandres, long-time CVBT Board member, former executive director, and former newsletter editor, also retired from the board in October of 2021. Linda's years of work with CVBT are immeasurable, and we also will miss her.

Change always presents opportunity, though. Therefore, it is with great enthusiasm that we announce three new CVBT board members who have decided to join the managing ranks of the organization.

First, I formally introduce our new treasurer, David Bohmke. Dave joined the team as a general board member in 2021. He grew up in Southern California and graduated from the University of California at Los Angeles in 1980 with a bachelor of arts degree in economics. He has more than 40 years of banking experience on both coasts, having arrived in Fredericksburg in 1997. He is a past president and more than 20-year member of the Rappahannock Rotary Club. Dave takes on the treasurer's reins from Pete Kolakowski, who has relocated from Virginia to Wisconsin but had remained in the treasurer's role. Dave has graciously now taken on the role, with Pete now assistant treasurer.

Next, we have a returning board member, Kevin Leahy. Kevin has had a lifelong interest in history with a particular passion for the Civil War. That passion led to an undergraduate degree in history from Radford University. Kevin started his career with the National Park Service as a park ranger before leaving to work for the United States Marine Corps in Quantico, Virginia. Upon moving to Spotsylvania County, he joined the CVBT board and was heavily involved in the fight to save the May 1 battlefield at Chancellorsville. Following that victory, Kevin then led a Political Action Committee that saw the election of a preservation-minded majority to the Spotsylvania County Board of Supervisors. He was appointed to the county's Planning Commission and the Economic Development Authority. After stepping away from the CVBT board for a spell, he has returned for his third tour of duty.

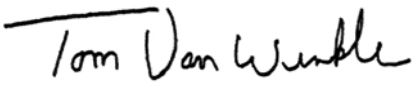
Last but certainly not least, we have the honor of a long-time friend of CVBT joining the board, John Hennessy. John is the recently retired chief historian and chief of interpretation

Tom Van Winkle

at the Fredericksburg & Spotsylvania National Military Park. He has spent some 40 years with the National Park Service, starting at Manassas National Battlefield Park. He also has written extensively, including his lauded books *First Battle of Manassas* and *Return to Bull Run*. John's years of experience and historical knowledge of the Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania-area battlefields will bring much to CVBT. CVBT and John have worked together saving endangered battlefield land since our inception.

We have other good news to report, as well. As you'll see in our CVBT News section on pages 2–3, we have been collaborating with the American Battlefield Trust on several key projects, and I'm pleased to report success on all fronts! We have more work to do, though. Why are CVBT and ABT partnering on these critical purchases? As ABT President Dave Duncan and I both agree, *there is no limit to what may be accomplished if we work together for a common cause*.

Look forward to more exciting battlefield acquisition announcements coming very soon. Also, save the dates for our 2022 Annual Conference, September 30–October 2, 2022. Our theme: "1862: The War Comes To Fredericksburg." The list of participating historians is growing by the minute, and we expect a tremendous weekend with unique events.



Tom Van Winkle
President, Central Virginia Battlefields Trust

Executive Director Letter

We have had a lot of activity around the CVBT office since I last wrote. Tim Talbott joined the staff as the new chief administrative officer at the end of February. I am thrilled to have him with us, and he jumped right into the deep end of the pool from day one.

Terry Rensel

I am excited to announce that we have met our fundraising goal for both the Beckham tract and Todd's Tavern. Thank you for your support of those projects!

We are working closely with our friends at the Virginia Department of Historic Resources to finalize the work of putting a preservation easement on all 91+ acres of Myer's Hill, as well as beginning the process of doing the same with the Beckham tract along the Jackson Flank Attack. We are also working on our grant applications to secure both federal and state funding for the Beckham tract, as well as pursuing other funding opportunities for our ongoing efforts.

Of course, we have our eye on additional preservation opportunities, some of which I hope that we can share with you, if we haven't already, soon.

Finally, registration is open for our 2022 annual conference. Our theme this year is "1862: The War Comes to Fredericksburg." You can find out more, plus register, at our website, www.cvbt.org.

Be well, thank you for supporting battlefield preservation, and I look forward to seeing you on the battlefield.

Declaring Victory — Twice!

Thanks to all our Partners — meaning you — we have met our $60,000 fundraising goal for the Beckham tract on the Chancellorsville battlefield. Once the grants are secure, we will be able to pay for this acquisition in full and save an important part of the story of Jackson's Flank Attack. Special thanks to the American Battlefield Trust, which pledged $50,000 toward this purchase, as well. This pledge, combined with expected grant money, left us with the $60,000 gap we now have raised.

You also have risen to the task of helping fill the gap for the especially important purchase of Todd's Tavern. This is a significant battlefield property that played a role in the armies movements from the Wilderness to Spotsylvania Court House in 1864. CVBT and ABT have been watching this large tract for years, awaiting a green light from the owners to indicate they were finally ready to sell the property. The green light was recently lit. ABT was able to secure two grants to cover the majority of this property's price tag of over one million dollars, leaving a small gap to fill. CVBT pledged to help fill that gap, and thanks to you, we have met our $15,000 pledge.

Dowdall's Tavern

On May 2, 1863, Maj. Gen. Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson led his Second Corps of the Army of Northern Virginia around the Army of the Potomac's right flank. Undetected by the Union XI Corps, he launched his attack late in the afternoon. Taken by surprise, the XI Corps was quickly pushed east from its position.

Near Dowdall's Tavern, just east of the intersection of the Orange Turnpike and Plank Road, Union Col. Adolphus Buschbeck set up his defensive line — today remembered as the Buschbeck Line — momentarily slowing the momentum of Jackson's attack.

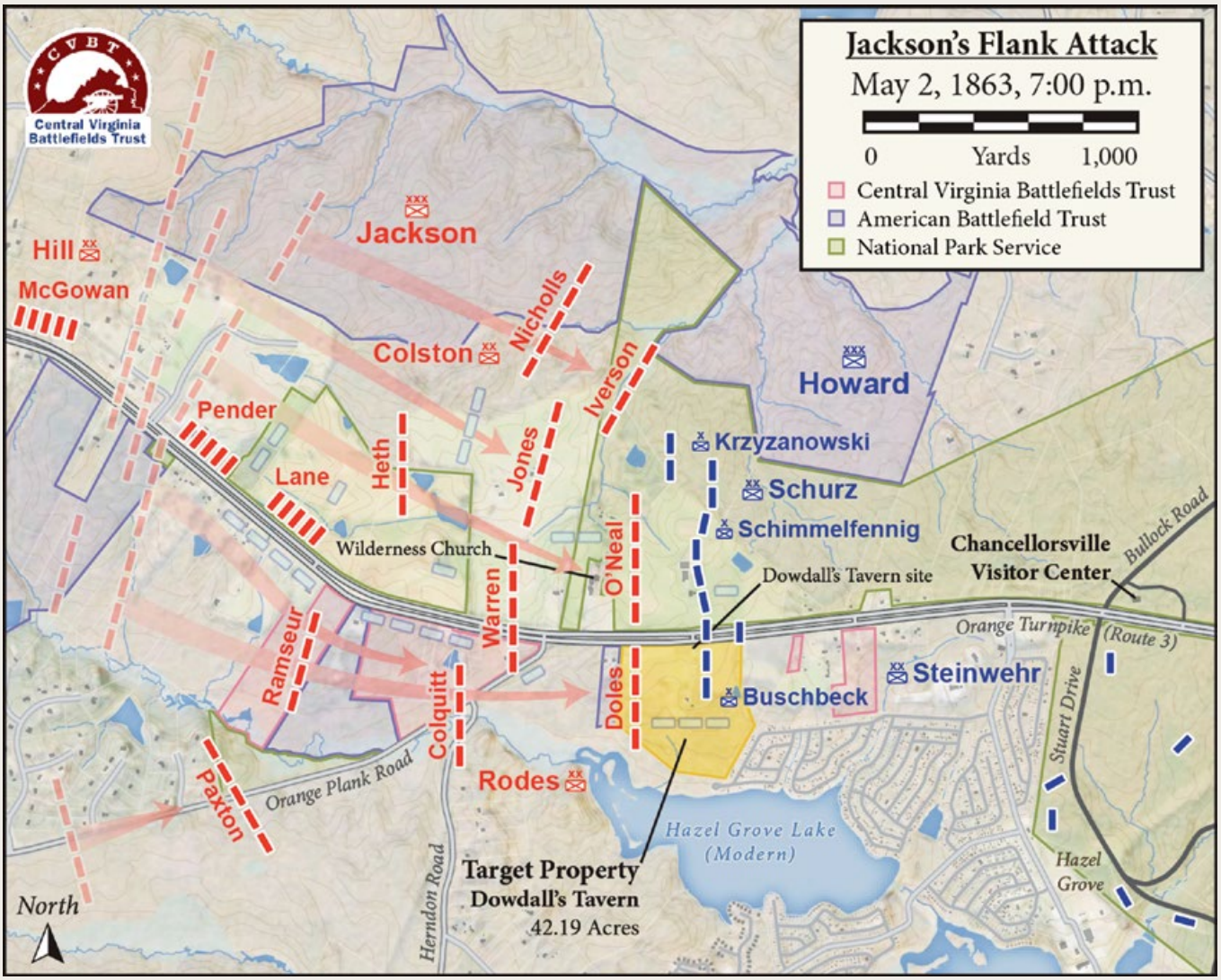
Later, after Confederates swept over the property, it was here that Jackson first encountered his most senior division commander, Maj. Gen. A.P. Hill, and told him, "We must press them. We must cut them off from U.S. Ford." That order set the stage for the fateful ride Jackson would soon make down the Mountain Road and his accidental wounding at the hands of his own men.

The Central Virginia Battlefields Trust, in partnership with the American Battlefield Trust, has a unique opportunity to save Dowdall's Tavern, an important part of the Flank Attack. At stake is a 42-acre tract of land that was the site of the tavern, Howard's XI Corps headquarters. CVBT must raise $67,500 to fulfill our commitment to the American Battlefield Trust. Please help us save this vital piece of pristine battlefield.

To find out more about this historic piece of land, and how you can help save it, go to our website, www.cvbt.org/dowdallstavern.

The site of Dowdall's Tavern, looking northward, with the westbound lane of Route 3 visible beyond the road embankment. *Chris Mackowski*

A monument to the 154th New York infantry sits on the edge of the Dowdall's Tavern property. The New Yorkers, who played a key role in the Buschbeck Line defense, have one of the few regimental monuments at Chancellorsville. *Chris Mackowski*



Federals tried to mount a stand against Stonewall Jackson's flank attack, with their left flank anchored on high ground where Dowdall's Tavern sat. However, the length of the Confederate line allowed Jackson's men to overlap the Federal line, forcing its collapse.

Join the CVBT Generals Today — Invest in Preserving Our History

The Central Virginia Battlefields Trust is blessed with many who have decided to join our ranks and support our mission saving the Civil War battlefields of Fredericksburg, Chancellorsville, the Wilderness and Spotsylvania Court House here in the ever-expanding sprawl of Central Virginia. Whenever we purchase one of these threatened important historic properties, you, our Partners, have always answered our call.

At times, properties come up without notice, and CVBT needs to work extremely fast, sometimes requiring us to write an immediate check to secure the land. These are instances where we cannot wait on a grant or an answer to an appeal.

And, of course, there are always the daily expenses of running the business. We have the need to cover our modest rent, daily office expenses, and employee salaries. CVBT has always run on a shoestring, and that has not changed. We have two full-time employees, and everyone else is a volunteer. Yet, our impact on battlefield preservation is considerable — on par with much larger organizations of our type.

We have a special designation for those who go beyond answering land appeals and paying membership dues and choose to invest in the organization further: **The Generals.**

Generals are those who give an additional $1,000 a year over and above membership and land appeal donations.

This is an INVESTMENT in our organization. CVBT has proven for more than 25 years that big successes can come from a moderately sized group of resolute individuals and partners such as yourself.

Those choosing to join the ranks of The Generals garner some special consideration. CVBT will hold at least one annual, private invitation-only battlefield tour with a noted historian exclusively for The Generals. There will also be a special event at our Annual Conference offered to this group. You will also receive a special Generals hat designating your further investment in CVBT.

For Generals annually investing $2,500 or above beyond land appeals and membership dues, CVBT will also waive conference fees for you and a guest in addition to the benefits listed above.

CVBT is a small organization doing incredible things. We appreciate all donors and welcome you as **Partners**. For those who are encouraged to further invest in our mission, we cannot thank you enough, as you literally keep the lights on and allow the business of saving Americas treasured history to continue.

We need at least 150 Generals supporting CVBT on a yearly basis. Won't you consider becoming a General today?

CVBT – Legacy Society

Planned Giving to Ensure the Future of Battlefield Preservation for Central Virginia and the Fredericksburg Region

Planning your estate gives you the opportunity to benefit some of the institutions and organizations you have supported during your life. In fact, many significant gifts that nonprofits receive come from the estates of regular contributors.

We hope that you will consider including a gift to CVBT in your estate plans. Your gift will help ensure a vibrant future for battlefield preservation in central Virginia. CVBT's long-term stability is based on solid planning, which will ensure that we are here in the future to serve the preservation of these battlefields. Your thoughtful choice to include CVBT in your estate plans would go a long way toward helping make this future a reality.

If you choose to remember CVBT in your plans, we hope you will let us know so we may acknowledge your gift. Of course, if you prefer, we will keep your intention confidential.

Contact CVBT for Information Kit and FAQ Guide

There are many ways to plan special gifts for CVBT and your other charitable interests — a bequest through your will is just one. Whatever your plans may be, we encourage you to call or write for more information, without obligation. You may reach us at:

Terry Rensel
CVBT Executive Director
executivedirector@cvbt.org
540-374-0900

Myer's Hill Preservation

BY JOHN F. CUMMINGS III

Having advocated for the preservation of Myer's Hill since 1998, I am pleased that the developers of Woodbury Manor subdivision have donated additional related land. Not only will it provide substantial buffer from pre-existing housing to the west, but it also preserves a vital cultural resource to the south of the site. This resource is an entrenched position established by Confederate infantry prior to their 4:00 p.m. attack of May 14, 1864.

Two brigades from the Army of Northern Virginia's 3rd Corps 1st Division were poised just inside woods that straddled the farm lane leading to the Myer home from Massaponax Church Road. It was there that the 96th Pennsylvania Infantry discovered the concealed southerners who quickly assaulted by an enveloping push northward, into the open fields of the farm, panicking the outnumbered Union defenders. Lt. Colonel

October 6, 2021: John Cummings on Tavern Drive near the intersection of Greenway Drive, looking east. At left of center and the radio tower on the fog-shrouded horizon, once stood the Myer home. Moving diagonally across the middle ground of this image, toward the modern tower, Harris's Mississippi Brigade swung their left wing of the trap that swept Upton's command across the Ni River, May 14, 1864.

Charles Wiebecke of the 2nd New Jersey Infantry was instantly killed by a bullet to the right eye while observing the enemy advance. Col. Emory Upton's men were swiftly ejected from their freshly established foothold on the summit a quarter mile distant, and pushed back in disgrace across the Ni River, nearly losing Gen. George Meade in the process.

The first known map of this feature comes from one of Warren's cartographers, likely A.B. Hammond, and labeled as "old line of the enemy," seen in the upper left quadrant of the accompanying map (left) from the Gouverneur Kemble Warren Papers, New York State Library.

Sgt. Henry Keiser of Company G, 96th Pennsylvania Infantry provided a detailed account of his discovery that preceded the Confederate attack: "I seen a Rebel hat lying on the edge of a gully washed out along the edge of a woods." Pointing this out to a comrade, he predicted the hat's owner would not be far off, a forecast that quickly manifested itself. "I soon seen the top of a Reb's head, who was sitting down in the gully," he said. Keiser demanded the officer's surrender at gunpoint, to which the southerner cried, "For God's sake don't shoot." Handing his weapons to his captors, the Confederate major swore he was alone, a promise that was quickly proven a lie. As Keiser recounts, "we ran into two full lines of Rebs, and I tell you, we were not slow in getting back, each one for himself."

At Franklin's Crossing today, a screen of trees on the north bank of the Rappahannock River hides commercial development. *Terry Rensel*

Brig. Gen. David Russell's brigade crossed in pontoons to establish a beachhead at Franklin's Crossing during the Chancellorsville campaign. The movement culminated with the battles of Second Fredericksburg and Salem Church. *Library of Congress*

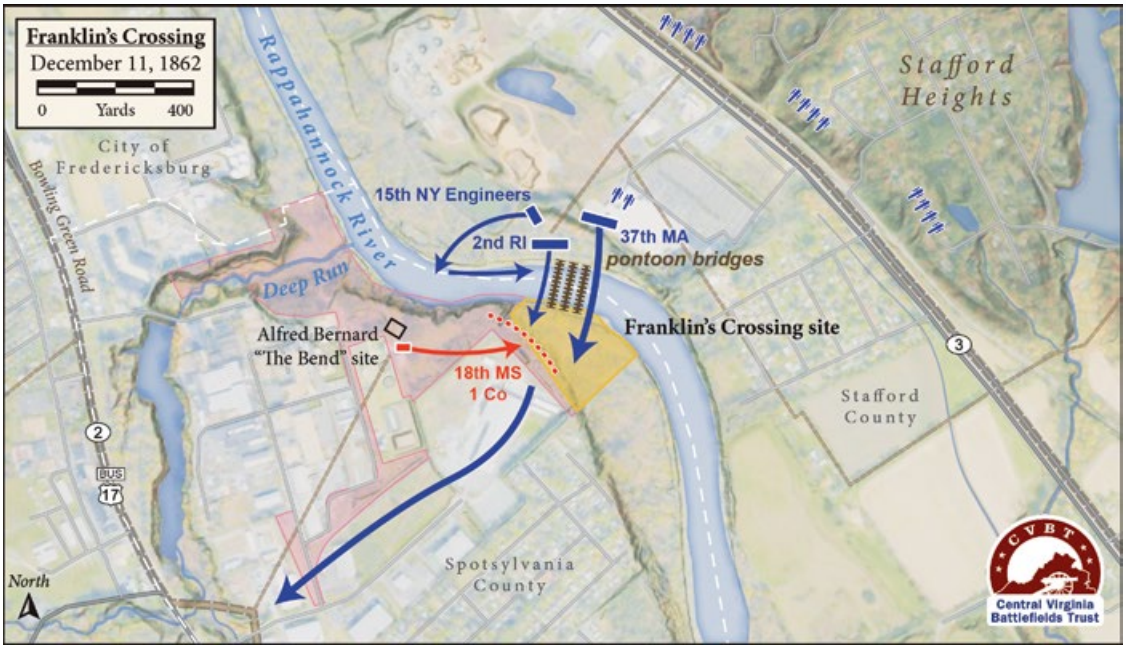
FORGOTTEN
Franklin's Crossing

BY JOHN HENNESSY

Nature and Ambrose Burnside conspired to make this otherwise nondescript place famous.

Nature did its part over millennia. Here the tidal Rappahannock, flushed regularly by floods, carved its way through sand and sandstone until the river ran 50 – 70 feet below the surrounding countryside. And here the river, seeking the least path of resistance, bowed eastward, away from the sandstone shelf on the south bank, then back again. As the water swept through this bend, it scoured the north (Stafford County) bank, but slower flow on the inside of the turn (remember 9th grade earth science?) caused the river to deposit sediment on the south shore. Over centuries, the river created an anomalous landscape on the Spotsylvania County shore — a sloping bowl that allowed for easy egress to the flatlands above. None of this mattered much to the locals, who chose other places to cross the Rappahannock. But to military engineers, the geography of what would become known as Franklin's Crossing rendered it a uniquely useful place to any army seeking to cross in a hostile environment.

And in December 1862, that's precisely what Ambrose Burnside intended to do, rendering "Franklin's Crossing" one of the most famous and heavily used crossings on the Rappahannock. Union engineers spanned the crossing with pontoon bridges four times during the Civil War. Three times they required stealth, good fortune, and fighting to put the bridges in place, surrounded as they were by Confederate soldiers watching for them — and sometimes shooting at them — from the south bank of the river. Once, in May 1865, the engineers worked in peace, as parts of the victorious armies of Meade and Sherman crossed the Rappahannock there on their return march to Washington, D.C.



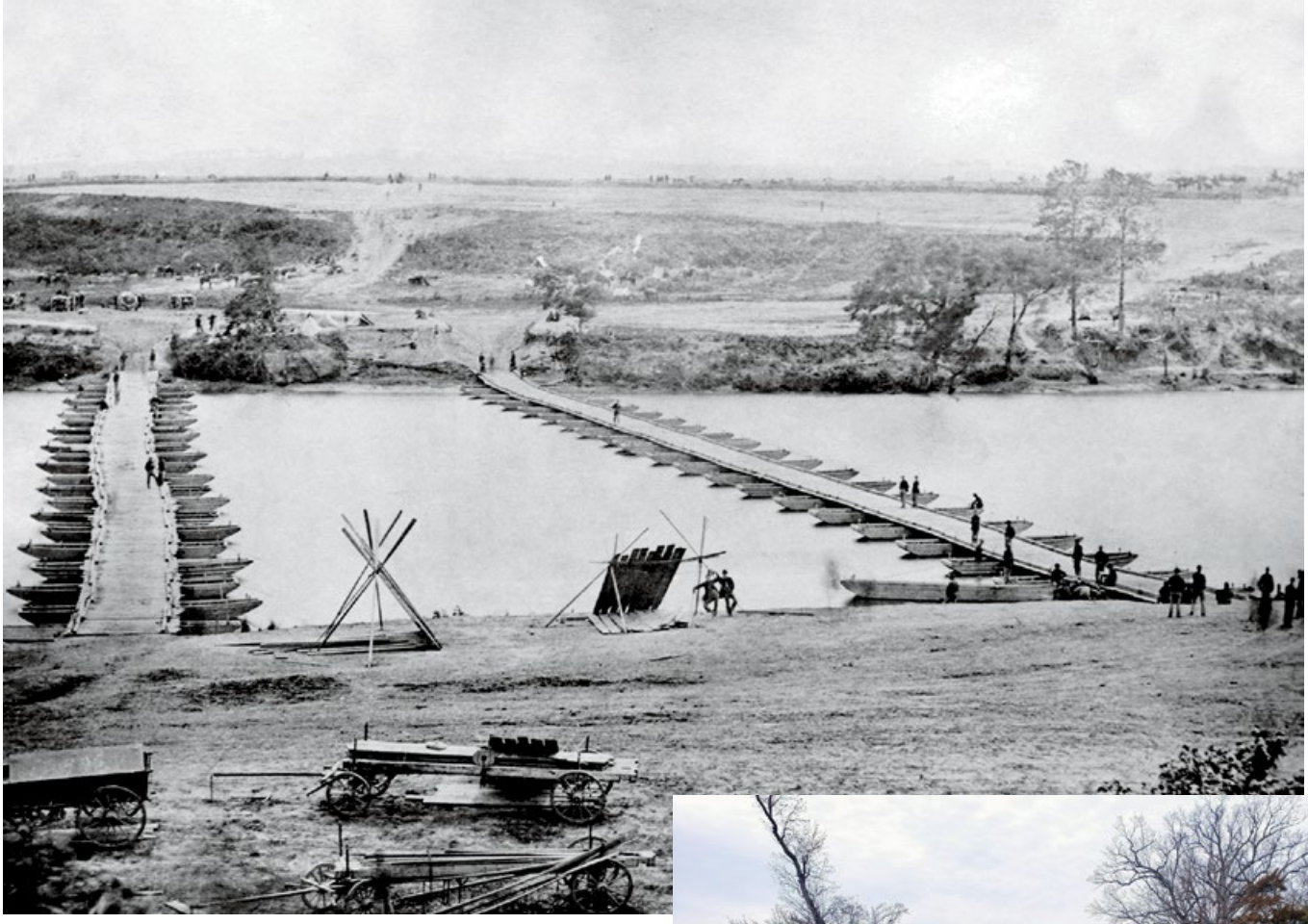
Because river access at the lower pontoon crossing site was so challenging, the 15th New York Engineers had to put pontoon boats into the water upriver and then float them down into position. When Federals finally completed the bridges and moved across the river, a company from the 18th Mississippi offered token resistance but did alert Confederate commander Robert E. Lee that Federals had successfully crossed south of town.

The site lay just over a mile below the southern outskirts of Fredericksburg, tucked between and below the plantations of the brothers Bernard. Arthur Bernard owned the palatial and expansive "Mannsfield" while Alfred owned the more pedestrian "The Bend," 1,300 yards upstream. The crossing's name was one of convenience, not honor. General William B. Franklin led 60,000 or so troops across the river into battle south of Fredericksburg. And then he led them back again.

Getting half an army across a river more than 400 feet wide was no small undertaking, and doing it in the face of enemy guns — well, that made for a challenge Union engineers simply had not confronted before. Their plan for December 11: build pontoon bridges at three sites on the river along a 2.25-mile front, and do it quickly, before sunrise — before the Confederates on the opposite shore could react. At all three sites work began about 3 a.m. on December 11, under a partial moon, hours before the 7:20 a.m. dawn. At the two sites in town, the Confederates reacted and resisted fiercely, delivering a deadly musket fire that killed, wounded, or drove away the bridge builders. The Federals responded with a massive bombardment. The racket seemed to portend desolation for the Confederates resisting the crossings, but in fact, when the cannon stopped and the bridge-builders again rushed to the bridges, the Confederate infantry re-emerged from their basements and backyard shelters and opened deadly fire again. So it would go, all morning, into the afternoon — a vivid example of a bridge-building plan gone awry.

Not so at Franklin's Crossing. There, ice, not Confederates, did more to slow the bridge builders. The wagon trains carrying the heavy-but-luggable pontoon boats arrived near the river at 3 a.m. The battalion of Regular Army engineers hauled their boats by hand the last 200 yards to the north shore of the Rappahannock. The men of the 15th New York Engineers, responsible for the upstream bridge at this site, pushed their wagons to the river's edge, but did so about 250 yards above the proposed site of the bridge. They planned to assemble their bridge upstream, beneath the steep cliffs on the south shore, then float it downstream into place. At 5 a.m., two hours before sunrise, the bridge-builders started to work. Some dug out the approaches to the bridge; others anchored the boats in the stream. Still other teams lashed the boats together, laid the planking, and put in place the side rails that kept wagon and cannon wheels from veering off the edges.

From the top of the ridge, it's hard to see much looking down toward the crossing site. The floodplain, once open, is now obscured by trees. *Terry Rensel*



Taken from the Stafford County side of the river, this photo shows not only the pontoon bridges but also the flat floodplain Federals used as an assembly area when they first crossed. They then cut two roads to give themselves access to the upper plateau. *Library of Congress*

The National Park Service displays re-created pontoons, two-thirds of the original size, on the terraces in front of Chatham Manor overlooking the Rappahannock. *Terry Rensel*

The engineers at Franklin's Crossing had drilled these tasks endlessly, and this day they worked flawlessly in the predawn darkness. An admiring infantryman recorded, "I can conceive of no duty demanding more true courage. … Every plank they laid brought them, living targets, closer and closer to the rebel sharpshooters." While the Confederates flailed the Union engineers in town, those at Franklin's Crossing continued to work unbothered through the 7:20 sunrise. By 8:15, both bridges nearly reached the Spotsylvania shore. Only then did the Confederates appear. A single company of the 18th Mississippi rushed from Alfred Bernard's farm, "The Bend," to the edge of the bluff and opened fire on the bridges below. Some of the engineers sprinted off the bridges; others dove into the boats for cover; a few froze with fear. Seven fell wounded.

When the Confederates appeared, the Federals responded quickly and massively. Reserve companies of engineers and Infantry along the riverbank opened fire on the Mississippians on the distant ridgeline. More impressively, Union artillery — some of it just a few hundred yards away — swept the top of the flatlands above the crossing with shell and canister. "I don't think I ever was in as hot a place," wrote Oscar Stuart of the 18th Mississippi. "There was not one foot of ground over which the deadly missiles did not at some time pass." The Union fire made the bluff simply uninhabitable for the Confederates. The few dozen Confederates who had ventured out just as quickly retreated, never to molest the bridge-builders again.

This vivid, deadly interlude demonstrated precisely why Franklin's Crossing would become the favored crossing point for the Union army when in the Fredericksburg region. At the two sites in town, the Confederates resisted the Union crossings at the water's edge. At Franklin's Crossing, the Confederates could

Hard to see among the trees, the remains of one of the Federal roads still traces its way up the hill. *Terry Rensel*

get no closer to the bridge builders than the edge of the bluff, about 150 yards from the crossing site itself. More importantly, Union artillery on the north bank of the river completely dominated the flats above the crossing site. On December 11, at least two Union batteries stood just a few hundred yards from the river — on or near where the modern Walmart stands. More batteries with larger guns stood atop the heights to the east, in what is today the Argyle Heights subdivision. And because the river bowed to the east here, creating a salient, Union guns could command the crossing from three directions. Unlike the crossing sites in town, the Federal army could control the Confederate side of the river at Franklin's Crossing from the Stafford shore, without a bridgehead on the Spotsylvania side.

By 11 a.m. on December 11, both bridges at Franklin's Crossing were complete (the engineers would add a third bridge the next day), while the battle of the bridges continued to rage in town. That Union ordeal would continue until 3 p.m., when the Union high command applied a hard-learned lesson: they needed to secure a foothold on the far bank before attempting to construct the bridges. The pontoon boats quickly became troop transports, and men of the 7th Michigan and 89th New York clambered in and started across. A frantic paddle and swift advance up the riverbank secured toeholds at both crossing sites; fighting in the streets soon secured the bridgeheads; and by sunset the bridges in town were complete. The success defined for the U.S. Army a doctrine they would follow forevermore: secure the bridgehead before starting on the bridges.

Only when the racket in town quieted did the generals give permission for the troops to start across at Franklin's Crossing. The 2nd Rhode Island took to one bridge, the 37th Massachusetts the other. They met only a scattered fire from the Confederates. Two companies of the 2nd scrambled up the slope and deployed as skirmishers. Once across, the 37th, a rookie regiment never before under fire, gave a cheer, and it deployed into line of battle. The Federals pushed up and onto the flatlands and advanced toward the Bowling Green Road (today's Route 2). In the coming hours and days, 60,000 infantrymen, artillerymen, and cavalrymen marched over the three bridges at Franklin's Crossing.

Their stay on the Spotsylvania shore would be short and costly. Five days later, at 4:30 a.m. on December 16, the last of Franklin's troops recrossed the bridges in retreat, part of a dispirited, defeated army. An hour later, engineers had the three bridges dismantled. By that afternoon, at Franklin's Crossing, not a soul remained — only the scars of impromptu roads and the ramps down to the river's edge spoke to the struggles of the preceding days.

The next spring, the Army of the Potomac would return to Franklin's Crossing twice. They came with experience and, notably, a doctrine for building pontoon bridges in the face of an enemy. Both times the army would cross at two sites below Fredericksburg — Franklin's Crossing and another site (thereafter named "Fitzhugh's Crossing") 1.7 miles downstream at the mouth of Little Fall's Run, opposite Henry Fitzhugh's plantation, "Sherwood Forest." On April 29, 1863, new army commander Joseph Hooker would mass nearly 24,000 men under General John Sedgwick at Franklin's and Fitzhugh's crossings. These men were destined to fight at Second Fredericksburg and Salem Church, while the main body of Hooker's army crossed at fords well upstream, fated to fight at Chancellorsville.

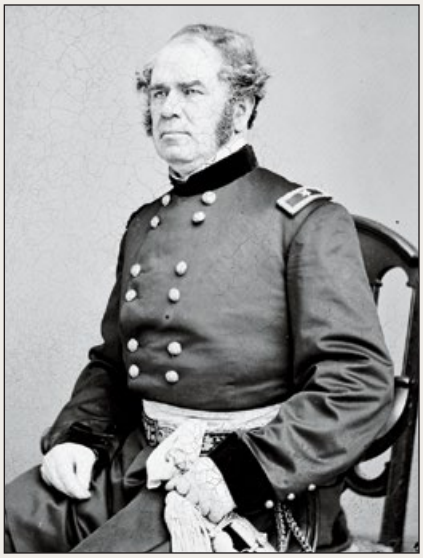
As in December, on April 29, 1863, the Union army approached Franklin's Crossing cautiously, under darkness, this time on a warm, foggy night, with a plan informed by the disaster of the upper crossings in December. This time, to ensure stealth, the 31-foot-long boats were carried by hand a mile to the river's

edge. Each weighed 1,600 pounds — "huge, unwieldy concerns" — and required alternating teams of 36 men to traverse the winding, mile-long road from what is today Argyle Heights to the crossing. Only their own shuffling and the occasional yelping "of some contemptible little dogs" accompanied them.

By 4 a.m., 23 boats were in place on the foggy Rappahannock shore. Soon, 60 men crowded into each. Engineers took the oars, and the boats pushed off into the mist, a 1,000-man landing party.

Two minutes into the crossing, wrote one onlooker, "A sheet of flame leaped out from the southern bank from at least 400 rifles, and then commenced terrific yells, screams and imprecations." Most of the shots sailed over the heads of the waterborne men. Their boats soon struck the Spotsylvania shore. The Federal soldiers piled out, formed in lines of battle, and pushed up the slope of the bowl under a scattering fire. The Confederates yielded readily, with few casualties on either side. This time, unlike December, the infantry had secured a bridgehead on the opposite bank before the bridge-builders went to work — the new doctrine in practice. By mid-morning, the Union engineers had three bridges in place without the loss of a single bridge-builder. Geography, mist, and a new doctrine made for a nearly bloodless crossing.

The Federals would use Franklin's Crossing again in June 1863 and nearly two years later, in May 1865, during the Federal armies' return march to Washington at war's end. Thereafter Franklin's Crossing would be largely forgotten, except as a spot on a map in innumerable books. Today it sits largely undisturbed and un-interpreted, tucked behind the Bowman Center in Spotsylvania County and, on the north bank, the Walmart on Route 3 East in Stafford. The geologic bowl that made the site both distinctive and useful survives, though now choked with vegetation. The site remains one of the most significant, unprotected gems on the region's Civil war landscape.



Brigadier General Henry Benham graduated first in the West Point class of 1837. A career engineer prior to the war who served with distinction in Mexico, his career as a combat officer in the Civil War was mixed, ending after a poor showing at the battle of Secessionville in June 1862. As he directed the bridge construction over the Rapphannock, one subordinate noted Benham was "in a beastly state of intoxication."

A DRUNKEN GENERAL?

Brigadier General Henry Benham commanded the Army of the Potomac's Engineer Brigade in April 1863. "Gruff, blunt, severe, and a Martinette of the old school" (as engineer officer Wesley Brainerd described him), Benham came during the movement of the pontoons to Franklin's Cross in the predawn of April 29. Furious that the crossing parties — 60 men to a boat — did not seem to be where he wanted them, Benham flew into a curious, spectacular rant that onlookers adjudged as anything from a manic tirade to a drunken harangue (the evidence heavily favors the latter). Benham sputtered and threatened, fell from his horse, placed a Union general (David Russell) under arrest, and finally tripped and fell on his face, opening a bloody gash. He thenceforth went "reeling around in his saddle & face bloody, a most disgusting site," his chief of staff wrote. Benham denied intoxication, but conceded "an earnestness of manner in me at this time." He would continue in command of the Engineer Brigade until 1865.

The Fight at Franklin's Crossing

BY CHRIS MACKOWSKI

Major General John Sedgwick had missed the battle of Fredericksburg, but he'd heard plenty about it since. The rout, suffered December 13, 1862, had become notorious by the time Sedgwick returned to the army on February 4, 1863. Wounded at the battle of Antietam leading his men into the West Woods, Sedgwick was still convalescing when Ambrose Burnside had led his men to grief along the banks of the Rappahannock River.

When Sedgwick rejoined the Army of the Potomac, he did so as the newly appointed commander of the Sixth Corps. During the battle of Fredericksburg, the corps's former commander, Maj. Gen. William "Baldy" Smith, had taken his men to the far bank of the Rappahannock at the southern end of the battlefield but did almost nothing to engage the enemy. As the spring campaign opened, Sedgwick would be tasked with taking those same men back across the river at the same spot, Franklin's Crossing, with expectations of greater success.

Federal commander Maj. Gen. "Fighting Joe" Hooker planned to leave around half of his army in Fredericksburg to act as a decoy while he moved the balance of his force to the west and south. He planned to cross using three upper-river fords and concentrate his men at a crossroads called Chancellorsville. From there, he would drive east toward the rear of the Army of Northern Virginia, which would, if all went according to plan, still be distracted by the decoy force Hooker had left behind.

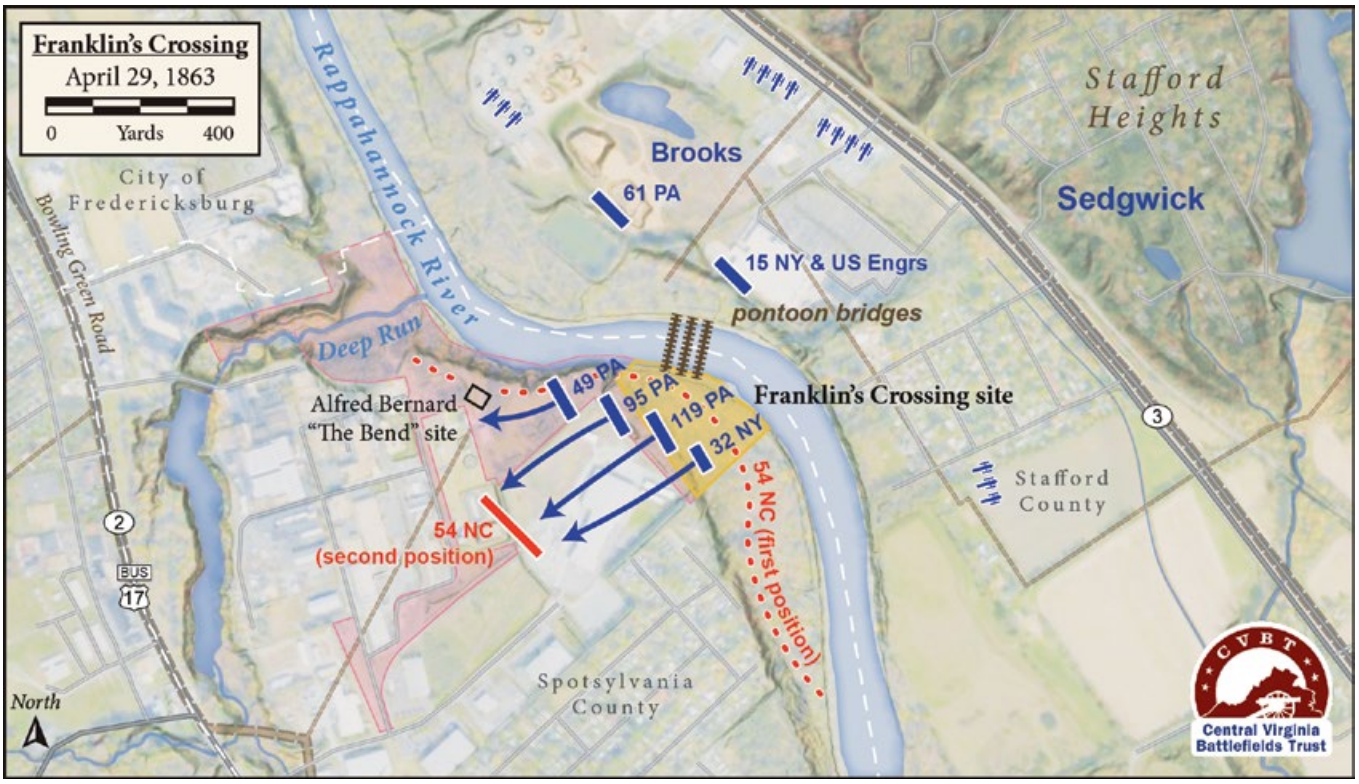
By dint of seniority, the task of commanding the decoy force fell on Sedgwick. With his own corps, plus the First and Third — some 65,000 men, including engineers and other support units — he was to move just south of Fredericksburg and cross the river in the pre-dawn hours of April 29 and fix Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee in place.

Sedgwick began his movement on April 28, ordering his fellow corps commanders to keep their movements as hidden from Confederate eyes as possible. "[T]he roads and fields swarming with columns of troops moving in the same direction, one of the most glorious sights I ever saw," one Federal wrote of the march.

Confederates appreciated the sight, too. Despite efforts to keep the movement a secret, Confederate spotters in the steeple of the Episcopal church downtown noted the "most animating & bustling sight":

> *Camps were going through the process of demolition; tents were being struck, and the immense parks of waggons were unfolding themselves into long lines, whose directions could be discovered by the clouds of dust which rose from the roads they traversed. In front of this moving spectacle, and nearer the River, could be seen the hosts of the enemy, drawn up in battle array, their burnished arms glistening in the sunlight and their banners floating proudly in the breeze.*

Artist Alfred Waud sketched "Pontoon bridges erected for Sedgwick's corps to cross upon." *Library of Congress*



The 54th North Carolina, spread along the riverbank in a long skirmish line, consolidated their position in an attempt to contest Sedgwick's river crossing. Pennsylvanians pushed up from their assembly point in the bottomlands, forcing the Confederates back and providing room for engineers to finish their bridge building in safety.

Confederates could not tell exactly where the Federals were moving to, and Sedgwick waited until nightfall before moving his men into their positions.

The December river crossing had taken a high toll on the engineers tasked with building the pontoon bridges that eventually allowed the infantry to pass. To avoid that same costly mistake, Sedgwick planned to send infantry across in pontoon boats to first establish beachheads — a tactic that had proven highly successful in December once someone thought of it. Brigadier General David Russell would command the infantry force, with the 49th and 119th Pennsylvania in the lead and the 18th and 32nd New York and the 95th Pennsylvania ready as back-up.

Getting the pontoons into position — for the storming party and for the bridge-builders — proved more challenging than expected, and short-tempered officers exchanged harsh words. Russell even found himself temporarily arrested by a drunken engineer who out-ranked him. One soldier described the resultant delay as "criminal imbecility." A light drizzle ensured an extra layer of discomfort.

By 4:20 a.m., though, all seemed ready. "At the first streak of day our pontoons were launched," wrote a Maine soldier who watched the action from the Federal shore.

One thousand Pennsylvanians crammed into 23 pontoon boats in that first wave, with 40-45 men packed into each boat. Men from the 15th New York Engineers, adept at handling the boats on the water, acted as oarsmen so the infantrymen could, if necessary, shoot back at Confederates. Each boat weighed 1,500 pounds, and at six feet wide and 31 feet long, with flat bows, they were built for stability, not speed. The engineers struggled mightily to move them across the current, 440 feet to the far shore. The lightening sky deprived the men of cover minute by minute, but they did enjoy the protection of a thick fog.

"So stealthily had the operation been conducted that the enemy's pickets did not sound the alarm till they saw boat loads of armed men approaching," wrote one Federal with evident relief. The first boats of the 49th Pennsylvania made it nearly to shore before Confederates finally fired any shots. Because of the lay of the terrain, most of the Confederate fire went over the Federals' heads.

"The gallant Pennsylvanians reached the Rebel shore," recounted one witness. "[They] jumped from the boats, many going to the waist in the water, and charged up the embankment. The Rebel pickets were taken altogether by surprise. … [T]he onset was so sudden, bold, and dashing, that the Butternut dogs, after firing a few ill-aimed volleys, fled in dismay."

Those Confederates, the 54th North Carolina, had been deployed along the shoreline as the advanced eyes and ears of the Army of Northern Virginia, but an uneventful winter had made them complacent in their watchfulness. Stretched out over hundreds of yards, they could not concentrate fast enough to mount any resistance as the Pennsylvanians scrambled ashore.

Instead, they fell back about 100 yards to a line of works prepared earlier in the winter. From their fallback position, they opened fire.

One of the first men hit was Col. William Irwin of the 49th Pennsylvania. Crossing the river, he had stood upright in his boat — like a "mast," one man later said — even as his men hunkered down to avoid Confederate fire. On the far side, as the men slipped and scrambled up the muddy bank, Irwin began forming his Keystoners into a battle line, but a bullet hit his leg. According to historian Kris White, this made Irwin perhaps the first Union officer wounded by enemy fire during the Chancellorsville campaign.

A graduate of the West Point class of 1837, Maj. Gen. John Sedgwick was personally brave and so beloved by his men they called him "Uncle John." *Library of Congress*

The 119th Pennsylvania, making up the second half of the Federal spearhead, had a tougher time than the men of the 49th. First, a current caught a couple of the boats and knocked them into each other, sending them off-course downriver. When they finally reached the Confederate shore, the men then had to navigate "the steep and slippery banks made doubly so by the rain." It was, said another soldier, "about twenty feet high … and so steep we could only ascend by catching hold of some small trees and bushes and pulling ourselves up."

Each time a boat deposited men ashore, the engineers serving as oarsmen turned back to the north bank to retrieve more. "[T]he order was given, and quickly the boats were pushed into the water, filled with men, the oar manned, and we started," wrote a man from the 27th New York. No sooner did they start then the Confederates opened fire on them. "The sudden zigzag blaze of the enemy's fire lit up the darkness," added another member of the second wave, "and it was a thrilling moment midway of the stream, in crowded boats, moving slowly — a target for a thousand rifles."

As men from the 95th Pennsylvania began to land as part of the second wave, Russell himself arrived among them to take personal command of the fight. The ongoing influx of fresh troops soon overwhelmed the North Carolinians. Russell's men "made very short work of capturing the enemy's works and about all the troops it contained," said one Federal. "Very few tried to escape, and those who did had a long, level plain to cross, and were exposed all the way to our fire. …" In fact, aside from two men captured, all the North Carolinians escaped. The Federals, meanwhile, suffered one fatality and ten wounded.

As Russell's men moved up the rain-slickened hillside to secure the plateau beyond, the engineers along the riverbank finally set to work on the bridges. The 15th New York Engineers found themselves in competition with the United States Engineer Battalion. "There was always a strife between these two branches of the service — the volunteers and the regulars — and here was a chance to test their skill," said one witness:

Brig. Gen. David Russell found himself under arrest while trying to sort out a mess with Brigadier General Henry Benham. Benham, charged with overseeing the crossing, "was deficient in physical courage, and needed stimulant," one observer said. Benham's resulting intoxication led to trouble for Russell. *Library of Congress*

They had plenty of spectators, as the army on either bank were watching their movements, and this served as an incentive for them both to do their best. Boats were quickly anchored, and the men who carried the string pieces and plank would not think of walking; but while carrying their load, or returning empty, would run their best. The morning was cool, but the sweat ran off their faces. Still they kept on. …

The volunteers won by six minutes, receiving "hearty cheers by thousands who lined the banks on either side." The two bridges lay about 140 yards from each other, and troops soon began flooding across. A third span would go up by midday.

It had taken five hours, but the Union army was once more heading across the Rappahannock River at Franklin's Crossing. "Imagine yourself … overlooking the beautiful green valley of the winding Rappahannock, dotted with country seats and alive with troops; the pontoon bridges; ten-thousand men holding with watchful care the opposite bank; the city off to the right …" wrote a Sixth Corps staff officer. "The scene was exceedingly magnificent."

With Kristopher White, Chris Mackowski is co-founder of Emerging Civil War and co-author of *Chancellorsville's Forgotten Front: The Battles of Second Fredericksburg and Salem Church* (Savas Beatie, 2013), from which this piece was adapted.

Jim Pates, Founding Board Member

The Preservation Profile section of our magazine focuses on an individual, or individuals, who have made a substantial commitment to preserving our history, particularly our area's Civil War history. In this issue, we feature a gentleman who understood the pressing issue of disappearing hallowed ground many years ago. He joined a group of concerned local leaders and citizens to do something about it. That individual is James M. Pates, current CVBT Board member and one of the founding fathers of the organization.

"History is something we all share, even if it's not something we consciously study," Jim remarked in a presentation at CVBT's 25th anniversary conference in 2021. "When such local histories are successfully celebrated and preserved in the physical landscape, we often recognize them as conferring a sense of place that can be experienced by many people."

Jim grew up in Fredericksburg, Virginia. His family had lived in Spotsylvania County for generations. As subsistence farmers, they never ventured far from the area known as Five Mile Fork, lying on the Plank Road between Chancellorsville and Fredericksburg. In 1986, Jim took a job as city attorney of Fredericksburg, a position he held for 18 years. In that job, he found himself in the heart of a population and development boom that was remaking the face of Fredericksburg and the entire area, particularly Spotsylvania County.

"From my vantage point, this seemed like a new war," Jim observed. "Our small community was again being overrun, only this time by new money and powerful forces that did not recognize or care about Fredericksburg's special place in history. … Instead, they saw progress and profit behind every tree and enthusiastically knocked down whole forests, leveled the hills (and trenches), and built thousands of houses, shopping centers, and highways."

The historical wrong that first affected Jim the most was the loss of Salem Church battlefield. A new church was built on the site, the old road was turned into a three-lane behemoth and the old church, donated to the National Park Service, was so compromised it was screened from site and rarely open to the public. When telling the preservation story, preservationists often point to Salem Church as an epic failure.

Many similar issues were happening throughout Spotsylvania County. Jim, with other like-minded individuals, tried to assist the National Park Service in preserving these historical recourses. What he found was that the NPS was alone in defending historic preservation and up against non-friendly local supervisors at the time, much more interested in tax revenue than history.

Jim and others felt this could not stand. Several meetings occurred with Jim and local concerned citizens, culminating in a gathering of some 30 local "movers and shakers" to create a local land trust and assist the NPS in preserving the four endangered battlefields. This led to the founding of the Central Virginia Battlefields Trust.

Jim continues to work toward the goal of preserving our Civil War battlefields and is currently the only remaining founding member on the board of CVBT.

"We have been true to our mission of preserving places and landscapes of great historic importance," Jim said in his closing remarks at last year's CVBT conference, "both for individuals such as myself, whose families were part of this historic landscape, and for the thousands of people whose forefathers fought here, and new people and even strangers who recognize the 'sense of place' that long-time residents like myself have all too often taken for granted. As a nonprofit, the CVBT has been single-minded in this mission, not sidetracked by illusions of grandeur or a lack of focus on actual battlegrounds."

Upper and Middle Crossings at Fredericksburg

A heavy fog hung over the Rappahannock River in the early morning hours of December 11, 1862, as the men of the 50th New York Engineers and the 15th New York Engineers started laying pontoon bridges across the river at the north and south ends of town, respectively.

These crossing are known today as the "Upper" and "Middle" crossings. The Upper Crossing is directly in front of Chatham, and the Middle Crossing is the location of the Fredericksburg City Dock.

Confederate sharpshooters hidden in the houses and businesses on the Fredericksburg side of the river could hear the sounds of materials being moved and bridges being built, but due to the fog, they did not know exactly where along the riverbank the work was happening.

As the bridges approached the middle of the river, around 5:00 a.m., Confederate signal guns fired, letting the men on both sides know the shooting was about to being. As the fog began to lift and the dawn began to brighten, the Union engineers in the middle of the river were sitting ducks for the Confederate sharpshooters.

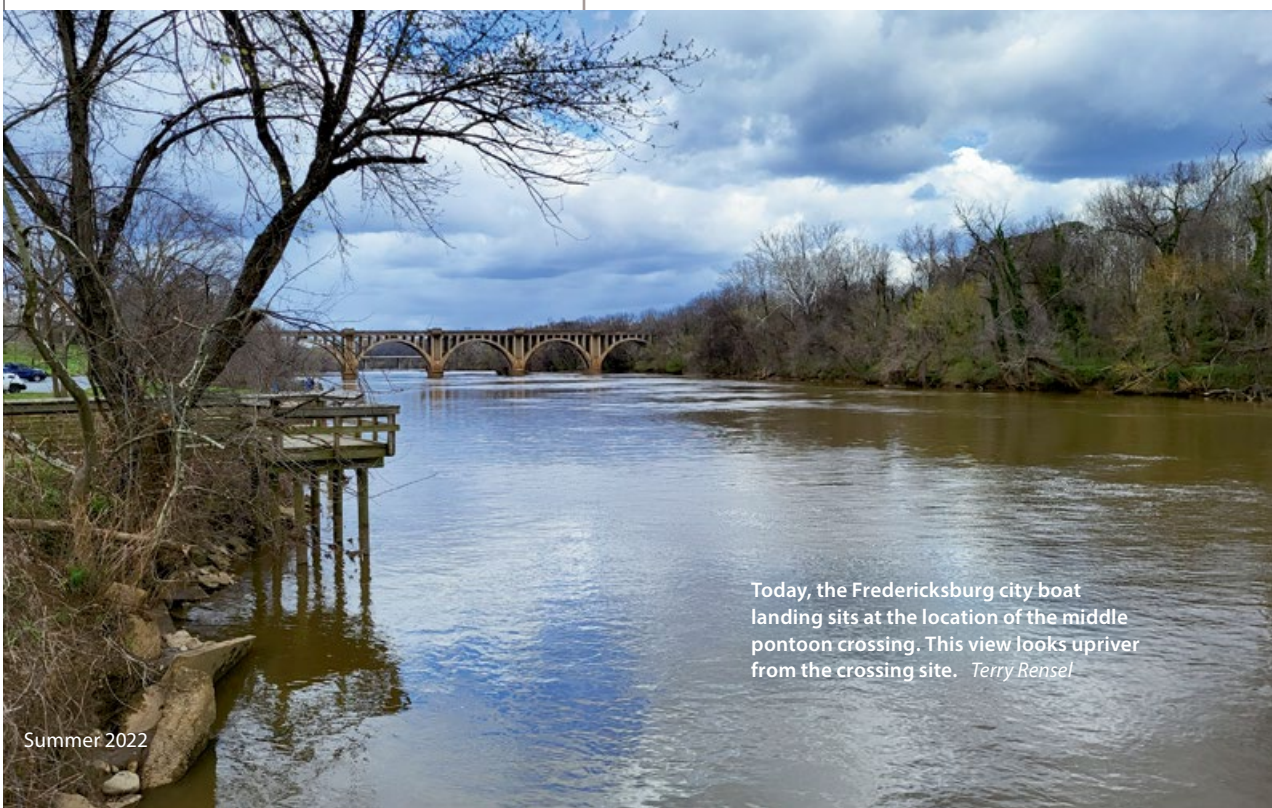
Building had come to a standstill, and something needed to be done to drive the Confederates away from the western shore. After an unsuccessful artillery barrage, Brig. Gen. Henry Hunt decided to use some of the as-yet-unused pontoon boats to transport troops across the river to try to clear the far shore.

At the Upper Crossing, Col. Normal Hall volunteered his 7th Michigan to make the attempt. Upon landing on the Fredericksburg side, near the corner of Hawke and Sophia streets, the Michiganders began clearing the houses. Additional troops soon joined them, and under their protection, the engineers finished their bridge. Soon, more infantry began to pour across.

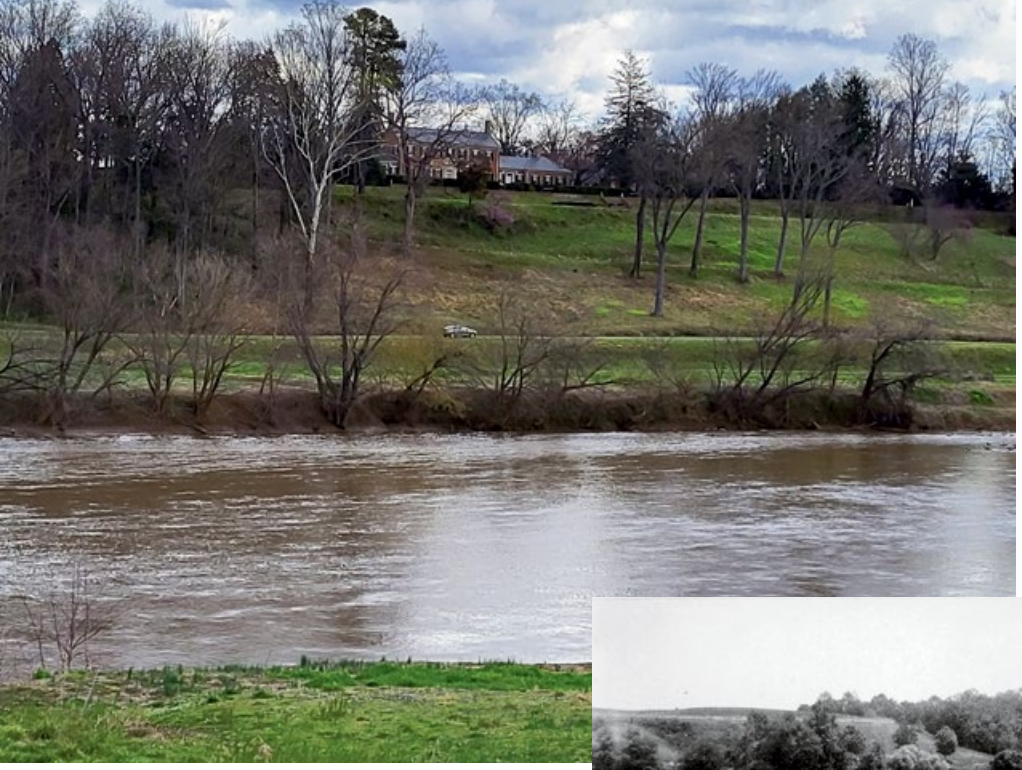
At the Middle Crossing, the 89th New York were "voluntold" that they would cross. The New Yorkers had the easier time of it, and within a half hour had accomplished their mission. Engineers completed their span shortly thereafter.

Today both crossings are preserved. The Upper Crossing is preserved by the National Park Service. The Middle Crossing on the Fredericksburg side is the location of the City Dock, used for recreational activities, while the Stafford side is part of George Washington's childhood home, Ferry Farm.

A third crossing site, the Lower Crossing — also known as Franklin's Crossing for the Union general in charge of that sector, William B. Franklin — remains unprotected just a few miles downriver.



Today, the Fredericksburg city boat landing sits at the location of the middle pontoon crossing. This view looks upriver from the crossing site. *Terry Rensel*



Chatham Manor, on Stafford Heights, overlooks the upper crossing site, which is protected by the National Park Service. *Terry Rensel*

A monument to the 7th Michigan, which was "voluntold" by its commander to try a riverine crossing, sits next to the Upper Crossing. *Terry Rensel*

The Rappahannock River used to be wider than it is today. This view looks across the river from the upper pontoon site toward Stafford Heights. Chatham would be out of the frame of the photo to the left. *Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park*

Attack on Fredericksburg shows the attempt to bridge the river at the middle pontoon site, with Fredericksburg stretching to the north. *Library of Congress*

In his memoir, *Bridge Building in Wartime*, Wesley Brainerd of the 50th New York Engineers described the experience of being on the partially completed pontoon bridge at the Upper Crossing when Confederate infantry opened fire:

"The bulletts [sic] of the enemy *rained* upon my bridge. They went whizzing and spitting by and around me, pattering on the bridge, splashing into the water and thugging through the boats.... Every one [of my men] started for the shore end of the bridge. Some fell into boats, dead. Some fell into the Stream and some onto the bridge, dead. Some, wounded, crawled along on their hands and knees and in a few moments all of us were off the bridge, all except the dead. The storm of lead continued."

Central Virginia Battlefields Trust

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Central Virginia Battlefields Trust 2022 Annual Conference Weekend

September 30 – October 2, 2022

Join us for a full weekend exploring the Civil War experience and the Battle of Fredericksburg. 2022 marks the 160th anniversary of these major historic happenings along the Rappahannock River, through the streets of Fredericksburg, and across the open fields toward the high ground of Marye's Heights and Prospect Hill. Learn about the stories of the soldiers, the civilians, and the enslaved whose lives would never be the same because of what happened at Fredericksburg, explore the streets and ground where they marched or fled, and be inspired to continue telling the stories of our nation's past through preservation and interpretation.

Ticket Prices: $195 – full weekend
$95 – banquet only

Watch the CVBT website (www.cvbt.org/cvbt-annual-conference) and other announcements for more information!