

BATTLE OF AQUIA CREEK

Historic Overview

Beginning in 1842, Aquia Landing was used as a transfer point, for both passengers and freight, between the Richmond, Fredericksburg, and Potomac Railroad (RF&P) and the Potomac Steamboat Company. On the eve of the Civil War there still was no direct railroad route between Richmond, Va. and Washington, D.C., making the rail terminus at Aquia landing strategically important to the combatants.

After 7 May 1861, Virginia State troops under General Daniel Ruggles took steps to construct defensive positions guarding the avenues of approach. General Robert E. Lee, then head of the Virginia State troops, detailed Major Thomas Williamson, Virginia Army, and Lieutenant H.H. Lewis, Virginia Navy to inspect Aquia landing and provide input on where artillery batteries should be positioned. These officers recommended placing a battery at Split Rock Bluff (location of the extant battery on the hill within Aquia Landing Park). This location, they believed, would also command the Potomac shipping channel. Consequently, a battery at this position would be offensive as well as defensive.

Lee left the actual decision on where to locate the battery to the field commander. General Ruggles had few troops to defend the Virginia shore and approaches to Fredericksburg, Virginia. He was concerned that Federal landings downstream at Marlborough or Mathias Point would easily outflank the Aquia Landing defenses. The Federals bolstered this fear as they took interest in Mathias Point believing a Confederate battery there would effectively close the Potomac to all river traffic. General Ruggles determined that the best way to defend the avenues of approach to the terminus of the railroad was to instead construct an earthwork at the tip of land, just behind where the wharf on Aquia Creek met the railroad.

Construction began on 8 May 1861 under the direction of Major Williamson. Work was unimpeded until 14 May 1861 when a Federal reconnaissance by the *USS Mount Vernon* found that the Virginia State troops had constructed a small earthwork with four embrasures within which four smooth bore cannons were mounted. The ships of the Potomac Flotilla did not engage the battery at this time. The official report (Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies [O.R.N] Series I, Vol. 4:462-463) of this reconnaissance includes a sketch of Aquia Landing and states:

MOUNT VERNON,
Lieutenant Sproston, Commanding,
Off Aquia Creek, May 14.

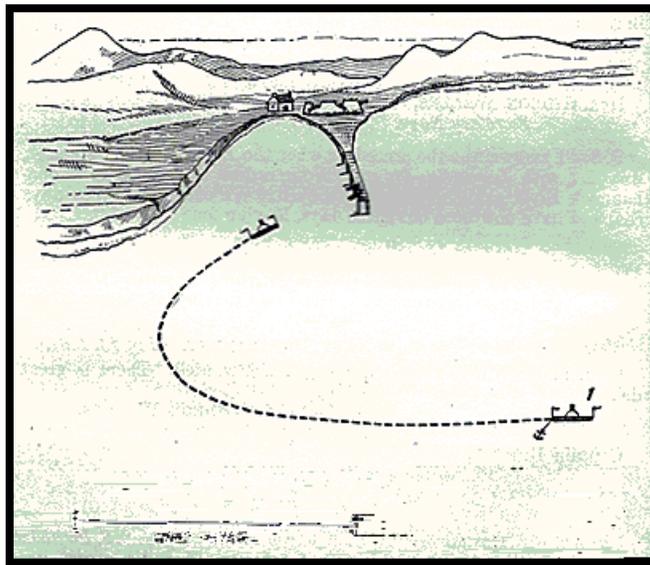
Anchored the night previous in position 1. Shortly after heard the beating of drums at Aquia Creek landing. At midnight blowing and raining, let go the second anchor. At daylight the reveille was beaten in the same quarter. Weighed anchor and stood in as indicated by curved line. Discovered an earthen battery inshore of the end of wharf. When within about a third of a mile stopped the boat, keeping the long gun trained on the battery. Observed with the glass an earthen battery, semicircular in form, having four embrasures; in the one next the house was a 32-

pounder manned and trained on the boat, an officer holding the lock string. In the second embrasure they were preparing to mount a gun. In the third was apparently a fieldpiece pointed toward the opposite side of the wharf, at the end of which we supposed, from the number of men gathered there, were two more fieldpieces concealed. The men, some twenty in number, at first advanced to the end of the wharf, and then, as we approached, retired to the main fortification, where they were now engaged in cutting down two trees in front of the fort, training the large guns and leading small arms and digging out the interior of the fort, most of which was visible to the eye unassisted by a glass.

While steaming into position noticed the *Pocahontas* coming down the river. Having remained stationary some ten or fifteen minutes, making the above observations, backed round, steamed out, and communicated with the *Pocahontas*.

I am informed by my pilot (Captain Walter) that a young man, Henry Hainey, who runs a sloop in the river and who was driven out of Alexandria on account of his Union sentiments, came up from Aquia Creek yesterday and reported having seen there in battery four guns of the size of this steamer's (32-pounder) and two fieldpieces. I noticed about fifty men in and about the battery, many muskets, and some in uniform.

Very respectfully, your obedient servant,
J. GLENDY SPROSTON,
Lieutenant, Commanding Mount Vernon.
Commander GILLIS, U. S. Navy,
Commanding U. S. S. Pocahontas.



Following this reconnaissance, on 24 May 1861, Federal forces crossed the Potomac, occupied Alexandria, Virginia, secured the Potomac River bridges, and began fortifying the Arlington and

Alexandria heights overlooking the capital. Because the Potomac River was the primary transportation route for commerce to Washington, D.C., the Federal leadership was concerned that the Confederacy would attempt a blockade of the river. The Potomac Flotilla was dispatched to test the fortifications at Aquia Landing. Beginning on 29 May and continuing until 1 June 1861, Federal ships would exchange artillery fire with Confederate forces defending Aquia Landing. The commencement of the battle was on the same day the Virginia State troops became part of the Confederate Army. Defending Aquia landing were local Stafford County volunteer

On the evening of 29 May 1861, the *USS Thomas Freeborn* fired its guns several times at the earthwork at Aquia. The tide was out and the ship could not come within effective range (Wills 1975:25). The next day the Federals focused on reconnaissance of Mathias Point, approximately 18 miles downriver from Aquia. In response, the Confederates, believing the Federals were going to land troops, began deploying forces to nearby Brooks Station (a rail station a few miles south of Aquia) and elsewhere to cover the landward avenues of approach to Aquia Landing.

On 31 May 1861, the *USS Thomas Freeborn*, which was now joined by the *USS Anacostia* and *USS Resolute*, renewed the bombardment of Aquia Landing. This battle has traditionally been viewed as the first between the Federal Navy and Confederate ground forces. During the exchange the Confederates established on a high point behind the landing a second battery consisting of four 3-inch rifled field guns under the command of Captain John S. Walker, 2nd Tennessee. It is likely that these guns were located on Split Rock Bluff. The Federal ships could not elevate their guns high enough to fire on these field pieces.

Federal reports indicate that the Confederate guns within the earthwork at Aquia Landing were put out of action, a claim that was disputed by the Confederates and later Confederate historians (Scharf 1877:96). Commander Ward, on the *USS Thomas Freeborn*, reported:

-pounders, and

the expenditure of all the ammunition suitable for distant firing, and silencing completely the three batteries at the railroad terminus, the firing from shore having been rapidly kept up by them until so silenced, and having been recommenced from the new batteries on the heights back, which reached us in volleys, dropping the shot on board and about us like hail for nearly an hour, but fortunately wounding but one man, I hauled the vessels off, as the heights proved
Series I, Vol. 4:490).

The report by Captain Lynch, Virginia Navy, commanding naval defenses of the Potomac confirms that the Federal gunboats had damaged the Aquia Landing battery.

battery opened fire upon us and continued the cannonade for three hours, when they withdrew. The largest steamer very much resembled the Crusader. As they kept at long shot, mostly beyond our range, I economized ammunition and only fired fifty-six times. One of the steamers had a rifled gun, the shell from which

penetrated through the sand bank, and one of them exploded in and completely demolished the room occupied by the officers and myself.

Upon our part no one was injured, but lookers on from the hills and opposite

The ships withdrew after about two to three hours having fired all of their long range ammunition (Wills 1975:25). In the immediate aftermath of the 31 May artillery duel, the Federal ships restocked their artillery magazines and were joined by the more heavily armed *USS Pawnee*. The Confederates repaired the earthwork on Aquia Landing, and placed one of Walker's 3-inch field guns into it. It appears that the position on Split Rock Bluff was abandoned even though fire from this position diverted the Federals. L
engagements with this battery I am not certain of having stated that on Friday Walker's battery of four 3-inch rifled guns opened fire from an eminence in our rear; and although their shot fell short they evidently diverted

The battle resumed on 1 June 1861. The *USS Pawnee*, *USS Thomas Freeborn*, and *USS Anacostia* engaged the Aquia defenses at 2,000 to 2,500 yards. During this engagement, the Confederates set fire to the building on the wharf because as on the 31st, the Federals were using it to range their guns. The smoke from the fire may have also concealed the Confederate battery from Federal view.

The after-action report by Commander Rowan, onboard the *USS Pawnee*, provides a detailed account of the five hour long battle.

lighter draft than the *Pawnee*, while this ship kept just outside on her starboard quarter to avoid grounding. As we ranged up the enemy set fire to the buildings on the end of the railroad wharf and then opened his fire, which was promptly returned by us. Finding my 15 second shell fell short with all the elevation the ports admitted of, I ranged ahead of the *Freeborn* and edged in as near as I could, feeling the way with the lead till I got within range of the forts with the 15-second shell, when we opened a heavy fire. I held this position as long as possible, when the ship fell off against our exertions to keep her steady and [it] became necessary to round out into the river and approach a second time on the same tack. Having got the ship nearer than the first position and as near as was safe, with but 2 feet of water to spare, and to the northward and westward of the *Freeborn*, we opened a terrible fire from five 9-inch guns. The batteries were twice silenced under the weight of our fire, but resumed again when our fire ceased. The houses near the forts were destroyed and the southern end of the bridge set on fire by the shells. The wind being from the southward the bridge was destroyed. The enemy's fire was almost exclusively directed at this ship, his rifled shot passing constantly over and around us.

This ship was struck nine times during the bombardment, four of the shot in the hull, one of them, passing through the bulwarks, tore up the deck and was glanced

on board by one of the iron straps. Of the shot that hit the ship above the hull one passed through the maintop-sail yard, another shattered the mizzenmast head and topmast, and another passed through the smokestack.

The cool and gallant bearing of the officers and crew excited my warmest admiration. Every man of the divisions performed his duties coolly and promptly and intelligently, showing the ship in a high state of training; to attain this end I have been ably seconded by the divisional officers, Lieutenant Chaplin and Master Blue, but above all by my able executive officer, Lieutenant R. B. Lowry, whose fine bearing on the occasion was everything I could wish.

I am happy to inform you that I have no casualties to report; the only scratch was one that I received on the face from a small splinter.

At 4:30 p.m., having expended all my 10-second and 15-second shell and the 38 rounds of ammunition for the rifled cannon and 155 hollow shot, I hauled off out

Captain Lynch also wrote an account of the 1 June Battle. In it he details the shortcoming of the Confederate defenses. The Confederate guns were mounted in embrasures and not *en barbette*. Consequently, their lateral field-of-fire was hindered and they could not keep the Federal ships under constant fire. Lynch also provides a count of the number of rounds the Federal ships fired; during the battle 599 shots were fired at the Confederate defenses.

the *Pawnee*, and at 11:30 a.m. they commenced a brisk cannonade, which continued with little interruption until about 4:30 p.m., during which the *Pawnee* fired 392 shot and shell and the other steamer 207, the greater portion of the latter being rifled shells.

Our sand banks not being *en barbette*, we could only fire as the enemy came within range through the embrasures. This, added to the long distance at which he kept, and the necessity of occasionally repairing damages to the breastwork, combined with my desire to save ammunition, constrained me to withhold fire except when something like a fair shot presented. The houses in the rear were very much knocked about and the railroad track torn up in three or four places, but thanks to a kind Providence, who seems to smile benignly upon our cause, no one with us was injured.

As the enemy had on Friday made the buildings at the extremity of the wharf his line of sight upon the battery, I had all the furniture, etc., together with the weather boarding, conveyed to the rear of the battery, and in the course of the forenoon set fire to and blew up the platform and outer end of the bridge.

I have spoken of Commander Thorburn's zeal in the first engagement, and can not too highly applaud the spirit and alacrity, tempered by deference to orders, of

Commander Cooke and Lieutenant Trobel. With the exception of Gunner's Mate Cunningham and Master's Mate Larmour, whose services were of inestimable value, our guns' crews consisted only of volunteer militia, who stood their ground bravely.

We had yesterday, in addition to our guns, a small rifled one from Captain Walker's battery, under the immediate command of Lieutenant Robertson, of

The Confederates caused damage to both the *USS Pawnee* and *USS Thomas Freeborn*, but no one was injured. After the battle *USS Thomas Freeborn* had to retire to Washington, DC and be repaired (Scharf 1877:97). The *USS Pawnee* was hit nine times with the hull, main topsail, and mizzenmast damaged (Wills 1975:29). The Federal bombardment damaged the earthen fort, buildings at the landing, and portions of the railroad track (ORN Series I Volume 4: 495).

In the aftermath of the 1 June artillery duel the Federals again withdrew to repair and replenish their depleted magazines. The Confederates took steps to strengthen their defenses. Two new earthen fortifications were constructed. Two columbiads (diameter unknown) were placed on one of the hills behind the landing (Wills 1975:29). It is likely that this location is the extant
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Aquia Creek, opposite Aquia Landing.

The Federals did not re-engage on 2 June. The Confederate artillery at Aquia Landing was too distant from the main Channel of the Potomac and was not an effective offensive weapon. The Potomac Flotilla was content with maintaining a blockade of several gunboats off of Aquia. These ships served as observation, kept the *CSA George Page* in Aquia Creek and occasionally fired on Aquia Landing. Throughout the remainder of the summer, Aquia Landing remained blockaded. Of note during that time, the Confederates deployed in the Potomac off Aquia the first known torpedoes floating explosives meant to detonate upon contact with a ship.

Meanwhile, both sides shifted their focus to Mathias Point. On 27 June 1861, the Potomac Flotilla sent a landing party to the point in an effort to construct a small defensive position.
as killed.

Beginning in the fall of 1861 and continuing until early March 1862, the Confederates blockaded the Potomac River. The main offensive batteries were upstream from Aquia Landing at Freestone, Cockpit, and Shipping Points, and in the vicinity of Evansport, Virginia. Eventually the *CSA George Page* moved to Quantico Creek. During this time, Aquia Landing continued to be defended but was a secondary position.

When the Confederates retreated in March of 1862, they burned the Aquia Landing wharf and destroyed the RF&P Railroad. Soon after the Confederate retreat the Federal Army rebuilt the wharf and railroad and used Aquia Landing for a supply depot through August 1862, at which time they evacuated the area in response to their defeat at the Battle of Second Manassas (Second Bull Run) and first Confederate invasion of Maryland.

In the fall of 1862, the Confederates then destroyed the facilities at Aquia Landing before retreating south of the Rappahannock River. Upon return, the Federal Army rebuilt Aquia Landing, which functioned as a primary supply depot for the Battles of Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville. In June 1863, in response to the second Confederate invasion of Maryland, Aquia Landing was again abandoned by the Federals and then burned by Confederate forces. In the aftermath of the Battle of Gettysburg until the end of the war, the Federal Army used Aquia Landing as a supply depot. After the war, the landing remained in use until 1872.

Summary

The 31 May to 1 June Battle of Aquia involved two Confederate gun positions and five Potomac Flotilla gunboats. The main Confederate gun position was an earthen battery located adjacent to the terminus of the RF&P and wharf at Aquia Landing. This earthwork had embrasures for four guns. At least two 32-pound smooth bore cannon were mounted in the earthwork and took part in the battle. On 31 May, during the battle, a field battery was also positioned on Split Rock Bluff.

Participating directly in the battle or providing support were the Potomac Flotilla ships *USS Pawnee*, *USS Thomas Freeborn*, *USS Anacostia*, *USS Reliance* and *USS Resolute*. The largest of the ships was the *USS Pawnee*; built in 1860 it was a regular sloop-of-war that mounted eight 9-inch guns and two 12-pound guns in broadside. The *USS Thomas Freeborn* was a converted side-wheel steam ferryboat that was armed with two 32-pound guns. This ship served as the flagship of the flotilla. The *USS Anacostia* was a sloop that was fitted with two 9-inch Dahlgren guns. Both the *USS Reliance* and *USS Resolute* were small screw streamers armed with one 24-pound gun and a 12-pound howitzer (Hanson 1953:42-43).

The landscape of conflict in which the combatants fought brought two different types of forces together. For the Confederates, the battle was fought by land forces defending a stationary target at an elevation of the river. Their fortification consisted of mounted guns within embrasures, thus they had a limited field-of-fire. Supplementing this position was, for a brief time, an artillery battery located on an 80 foot high bluff, approximately 2500 ft. to the rear of Aquia Landing. The forces the Confederates had to defend this position were relatively new untrained volunteers commanded by both Infantry and Naval officers.

In contrast the Federal forces included five gunboats mounting superior guns; some of which (ORN Series I Volume 4:490). Additionally, these gunboats had the ability to maneuver in and out of range and presented a moving target. During the battle the Federal ships positioned themselves 2000 to 2500 yards away from Aquia landing (ORN Series I Volume 4:493). This is within the main channel of the Potomac, on the far side of the shallows that formed a natural barrier protecting the entrance of Aquia Creek. The Federal ships could not come closer due to shallow water at the creek mouth. There was only one channel deep enough for ships to approach Aquia Landing and narrow, with but 10 to 12 feet of water-- (Volume 4:462).

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