
Essex County Museum and Historical Society Bulletin



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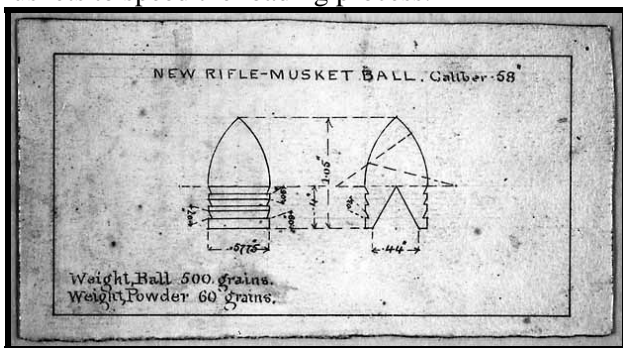
TAPPAHANNOCK, VIRGINIA

SEPTEMBER 2010

Civil War and Reconstruction in Essex County

By Gordon Harrower

The War Between the States/War of Yankee Imperialism/The American Civil War: No matter what you call it, you probably know a good deal about it perhaps from a mixture of what you have studied and genuine interests you have developed over the years. Suffice, then, for us to remember here that it was an intense, bloody conflict that pitted outmoded tactics, mainly frontal assaults, versus modern firepower, with the lethal combination of the .58 calibre rifled musket and the **Minié bullet**, designed for muzzle-loading rifle-muskets to speed the loading process.



The minie bullet was smaller than the diameter of the musket barrel, and had two or three grooves and a conical cavity in its base. When the rifle was fired, the gases formed by the burning of powder expanded the base of the bullet so that it engaged the rifling in the barrel. For the first time in history, infantrymen could load quickly, aim at a target from a safe distance, and shoot with probable accuracy.

Both sides, most notably the Federals, suffered crippling losses from the misconception that massed numbers could prevail over entrenched defenders adept in the use of 'high tech' weaponry.

Why was this war fought? The issue of slavery is today presumed by many to have been almost alone in igniting the struggle — the North fought to emancipate the slaves and the South was determined to maintain the 'peculiar institution', as it was termed. Others are convinced that states' rights were the primary fuel of Southern martial ardor, and that the North mainly rallied to the cause of restoring the Union. Certainly it was a combination of the two. Strategically, the North could prevail only by invading and defeating the Confederacy; if it could not succeed in this, the South would win. A measure of the intensity generated by the Union's incursive strategy may be found in this 1864 exchange between a Yankee officer and a Rebel POW in Winchester:

Yank: "Why do you fight us so damned hard?"

Reb: "Because you're here."

Essex County had earlier sent her men off to fight Indians, French, British, and Mexican foes, and its venerable militia had ever stood willing, if not always prepared, to defend the homeland. Now, at the outset of the 1860s, there loomed the spectre of a heartrendingly different enemy — fellow Americans. Initially, concerns about abolitionist raids spurred the formation of volunteer units throughout the South, and thus the Essex Sharpshooters came into being, as did some months later, the Essex Greys and a cavalry company known as the Essex Light Dragoons. While most secessionism formed in the Deep South, before long it surged into the border states, including crucially-situated Virginia. Following the 1860 elec-

tion in which not one Essex vote was cast for Lincoln, and the withdrawal of South Carolina from the Union, the sentiment here in Virginia was overwhelmingly 'secesh'. In early 1861, delegates from Essex and King and Queen met at Millers Tavern and adopted the 'Millers Resolutions' which set forth that: 1. States could withdraw from the Union; 2. Virginia was committed to the defense of the South; and most important, 3. Virginia should indeed leave the Union. In April 1861, the first shots were fired at Fort Sumter, and the war was underway.

Soon the Sharpshooters were joined with the Greys and other volunteer units to form the 55th Virginia Infantry Regiment, and the Dragoons similarly became a company of the 9th Virginia Cavalry Regiment.



The 55th to the rescue of stone-throwing Confederates at Second Bull Run (From Battles and Leaders, courtesy of FSNMP). Reprinted from Settlers, Southerners, Americans.

It was estimated that virtually every able-bodied white male in the county volunteered, and not surprisingly, most of the leadership positions were filled by men of means — the gentry. Other Essex men also chose to serve their new nation; for example, cousins Robert and Richard Garnett, both of the West Point class of 1841, were career officers in the US Army, the former a distinguished veteran of the Mexican War. In early spring 1861, they resigned their federal commissions, and donned Confederate gray. Robert was appointed a brigadier general, and while in command of forces in what is now West Virginia, was killed in action. Richard, too, was made a brigadier, sent to the Shenandoah Valley, and placed in charge of the famous Stonewall Brigade, previously led by his now-corps commander, Thomas “Stonewall” Jackson.

After incurring the latter’s wrath by withdrawing his troops when they were badly outnumbered and out of ammunition, he was restored to command of another Virginia brigade. Mounted, and in their van, he was killed during Gettysburg’s famed Pickett’s charge. Among his last words was this exhortation to his troops, “Step out [but] don’t double quick. Save your strength and ammunition for the final charge.”

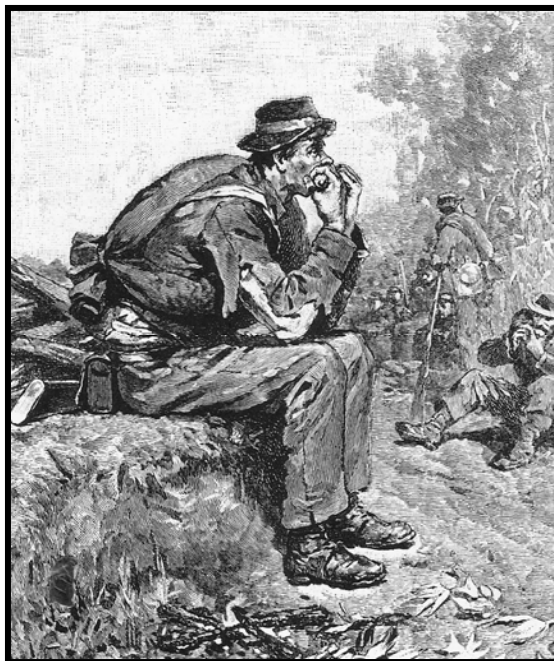
In the summer of 1861 the 55th Infantry was tasked with the construction and manning of a bastion on the Rappahannock River to defend Fredericksburg from Federal naval forces. Its ramparts built of layer upon layer of marsh sod covered with sand, Ft. Lowry boasted an eight-gun battery, powder and shot magazines, and barracks sufficient for several thousand troops. Then in March 1862 came orders to abandon the fort, and assigning the 55th to A.P. Hill’s light division, Army of Northern Virginia, where it served with distinction in all of that Army’s many score battles: its shaky baptism of fire during The Seven Days; shining redemption at Second Manassas; the Seizure of Harpers Ferry during the Antietam campaign; Chancellorsville, where at the front of Stonewall Jackson’s decisive flank attack, the 55th lost 140 of its 300 men; Gettysburg, and Pickett’s charge which took down still more. (Among the many casualties incurred by the 55th at Gettysburg was Captain Austin Brockenbrough who fell to a sniper’s bullet; he is buried in the family graveyard adjacent to the Essex County Museum); the Wilderness, where the 55th held firm against repeated assaults; the siege of Petersburg’s nine months of debilitating trench warfare; finally, Appomattox and the unthinkable: surrender.



Allen C. Redwood’s sketch of the 55th in battle on July 1 outside of Gettysburg (From Battles and Leaders, courtesy of FSNMP). Reprinted from Settlers, Southerners, Americans.

As a valued component of General J.E.B. Stuart's cavalry corps, the 9th Virginia Cavalry Regiment, too, had a distinguished war record. Assigned to seemingly constant patrol, picket, reconnaissance, and flank protection duties, they and their mounts seldom enjoyed a moment of downtime, still were ever present to fight in many of their corps' major engagements: Antietam, where just behind the lines they could hardly find a place to camp because of the piles of dead and wounded; the containment of Stoneman's raid on Richmond; the bloodletting of Fredericksburg; the huge all-cavalry fight at Brandy Station; and another on Gettysburg's third day; glory at Reems Station and Aldie; dismounted action at Spotsylvania Court House; the last charge at Appomattox. A measure of the 9th's worth came from the hated Yankee cavalryman, Judson Kilpatrick: "...they were the best Cavalry regiment in the Confederate service." The 9th is also known because of the death of Dragoons' commander Captain William Latane, the only man killed in a Confederate cavalry charge at Old Church during Stuart's 1862 ride around McClellan's Union Army. The painting, entitled 'The Burial of Latane', by artist A. G. Campbell, later lithograph, is to this day a touchstone of white Southern pride and nostalgia.

Meanwhile, the citizens of Essex from time to time found themselves embroiled in the struggle since the Federal navy not only blockaded the coast, but probed up-river, seeking enemy shipping and conducting amphibious raids on both the Northern Neck and Middle Peninsula. In April 1862 a Union landing party came ashore at Tappahannock, raised the stars and stripes, refreshed themselves, and left without freeing any of the many slaves who had thought deliverance was at hand. In May 1864, a small Union force landed and set fire to a grain-storage building, and a month later, a regiment of US Colored Troops, supported by cavalry and sailors, swept through Montross and Warsaw on the Neck, then crossed the river to land just above Tappahannock. There, they took 500 head of cattle, many sheep and horses, and freed several hundred slaves. Confederate attempts to thwart this incursion were repulsed by the firepower of Yankee gun-boats.



A member of the 55th eating his usual rations (From Battles and Leaders, courtesy of FSNMP). Reprinted from Settlers, Southerners, Americans.

On an unspecified date a ten-man detachment from the 1st Maine Cavalry landed at Tappahannock and was confronted by 450 Essex militiamen who, when the Yankees refused to surrender, chased them into Great Dragon Swamp. The next day, local planters assisted by bloodhounds, hunted them down, captured them, and sent them off to Richmond under guard. En route, they ran into a large Federal unit which freed the Maine men and captured their escorts. The final Union landing occurred in March 1865, resulting in the destruction of several watercraft, and the shelling of a Confederate cavalry patrol. Another incident occurred

when Federal gunboats bombarded a group of family and friends who had come to visit with Edward Macon Ware, then near death, somehow mistaking their horses and carriages for a Rebel artillery unit. The day was saved when slave Randall Segar got the ships to stop firing by running back and forth waving a white tablecloth.

After Gettysburg, and particularly the fall of Vicksburg, the fortunes of war turned against the South, as large, well-equipped Northern forces gradually wore down their never-say-die foe. In April 1865 General Lee surrendered his army at Appomattox and within a few weeks the war, by far the worst in American history, was over and the troops came home — what was left of them. The 55th Virginia Infantry had sustained 40% casualties and the 9th Virginia Cavalry over 37%. Interestingly, the troops — later veterans — of both sides had come to look upon one another with respect and, in time, with a fondness that would be expressed so touchingly at joint reunions of major battles. Yet for Southerners The War remained, and still does, a talisman of their honor, bravery, rightness, and dedication, as exemplified by the haunting image of the embattled Confederate courageously fighting for his home and the rights he so firmly believed in.

The citizens of Essex, who had supported the Confederacy with patriotic enthusiasm, and all manner of goods and services — no mean task given the blockade and the ongoing threat of enemy raids — were now faced with uncertainty about their future;

what, they wondered, would become of their plantations and farms without the slaves? Would freed blacks work the fields, and what, if anything, would they be paid, and in what kind of specie? (Confederate money was now worthless). While some stayed on out of a kind of loyalty to their former masters, most, understandably, did not. With little income, many owners offered their ex-slaves shares in their farms in lieu of salaries, thus the emergence of the term 'sharecropper', a system that did not work, largely because white owners were loath, or unable, to pay freedman their expected share, either in currency or in kind. As it evolved, then, the big plantations suddenly went fallow for want of labor, and the gentry came to the abrupt realization that they were poor.

Reconstruction: Then, and for generations to come, most white Southerners would see it as punishment for their having seceded from the Union. In essence, it consisted of a series of legislative measures imposed by the federal government; ostensibly to bring the former Confederate states back into the Union under the latter's frequently harsh terms — terms stringently enforced by Federal military occupation. (Essex County was garrisoned by the 2nd New Hampshire Infantry Regiment, headquartered in Tappahannock). An important component of Reconstruction was the passage of legislation which granted voting rights to blacks, with the result that throughout the South they cast their ballots in large numbers, and were themselves elected to significant positions, including seats in the United States House and Senate; for Essex County blacks, these ranged from representation on the federal Constitutional Convention and the Virginia House of Delegates, to county magistrate, sheriff, and membership on the Tappahannock town council.

In other vital respects, life in Essex County boiled down to a struggle for survival; land values fell dramatically, crop yields similarly plummeted, and many were reduced to subsistence farming — growing barely enough to stay alive — which exacerbated the sense of bitter hopelessness felt by most whites, particularly the gentry whose fall from the heights had been so ruinous. For all here it was terribly hard; a citizen noted, "It was worse than the war itself...Transportation was wrecked, livestock gone, there were enormous difficulties in getting seed and machinery. The patriarchal system was shattered...and even the schools were closed." And then there were the Northern carpetbaggers, some of whom came south to help, and others who saw in the confusion an opportunity to make their fortunes.

White Southerners were devastated economically, emotionally, and spiritually by the defeat of the

Confederacy, and were ever reminded of their loss by the poignant sight of the wounded and incapacitated veterans in their communities. As healing set in, the intellectual and literary movement known as the Lost Cause emerged to portray the Confederacy as noble, and most of its leaders as exemplars of old-fashioned chivalry, most powerfully Robert E. Lee. The South, it maintained, had fought valorously for the cause it believed in, and had succumbed in the end not to the military skills of the Union armies — which it was alleged, were led by incompetents of low moral character — but by overwhelming Northern resources and force. Pickett's charge stood as a symbol of this credo. Lost Cause themes were taken up by organizations such as the United Confederate Veterans, represented in Essex by the Wright-Latane camp, and the United Daughters of the Confederacy. Fairs were laid on in Tappahannock to honor veterans, many proudly wearing their old grey uniforms and, in 1909 the Confederate Monument, paid for with funds raised by the Woman's Monument Association of Essex County in concert with the UDC, was dedicated, with some 4,000 former Confederates and thousands more visitors on hand.

Reconstruction ended in Virginia in 1870. For white Southerners its legacy, which was to last well into the future, was bitterness and resentment for what they felt was the unwarranted humiliation and economic ruination which had been heaped upon them by the victors. Indeed, the brand of retribution visited upon the former Confederacy is deemed by many to have exceeded in its harshness that dealt to our enemies of World War II. For the former slaves, it had begun with liberty, feelings of euphoria, and opportunity, and even though black progress would soon be in part checked by the century-long era of Jim Crow and its 'separate but equal' doctrine, most African Americans consider the period to have been beneficial, not least because, for the first time in the New World all of them were free.

Noted Essex County educator and historian Lillian H. McGuire wrote that Southern blacks now had choices. They could "venture out and make a living for themselves. While many chose to migrate North, many others chose to stay in the South," where the Freedmen's Bureau helped "the displaced former slaves make adjustments to their newfound way of life." Of equal importance, they were, she added, freed spiritually "...no more having to worship God in secrecy...or having to sit in the segregated section of the master's church."

Sources:

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Author Biography

Gordon Harrower is a retired educator with a lifelong interest in military history, a career enhanced through military service to his country and teaching in institutions of higher learning. His military career began after college with his commission in the Artillery on 14 June 1952, for two years of active duty in the Korean War. After discharge, he spent the next ten years in the Army Reserve, and eventually moved to Virginia. In 1990 he joined the Virginia Defense Force, retiring from the VDF in 2004. He is a longtime docent, current Board Member, and Past President of the Essex County Museum and Historical Society. He and his wife, Anita, have lived in Dunnsville, Virginia for 13 years.

Welcome Everyone!

3rd Annual ECMHS Fall Evening Gala

When:

Friday, October 8th, 6-10 PM

Where:

The 1728 Courthouse - Old Beale Church

What:

Live music, delicious food, open bar, silent auction, and a live auction by Louis Muse

- Featured food by Java Jacks, To Do Café, and Ken and Sandy Pounsberry
- Live Auction highlights include: Stays at the Essex Inn and Stratford Hall; Paintings by Anne Careatti and David Jett; Kayak Trip on Baylor's Creek; Northern Neck Wine Tour; Whitewater Canoe Trip; Boat Trip on Carter's Creek; Plane Ride; Musket Firing lesson on an 1862 Springfield Rifle; Wildlife Boat Trip; Timeless Passes to (9) Fredericksburg Historical Attractions; Day of History in Richmond

Tickets:

\$40 per person

May be purchased at the Museum or at the event

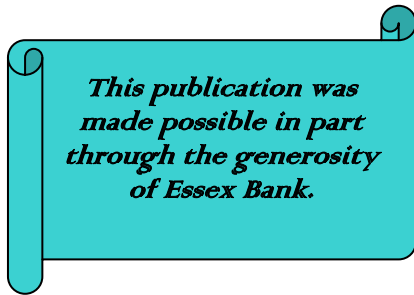
More Auction Items courtesy of:

Advanced Auto	Gift Gallery	Roma's
Almost There	Hoskin's Creek Table Company	Sheetz
Anna's Pizza	Joe's Inn	Shoney's
Asia Café	June Parker Oil Company	Southern States
Carson Flooring	Lowery's	Surfside 2
Chandler Chevrolet	Martin-Sale	Swinson's Nursery
China King	McDonald's	Tappahannock Furniture
Clarke's Auto	Meineke	Tappahannock Pharmacy
Crying Shame	Miller's Greenhouse	Tappahannock Veterinary Clinic
Daily's Café	Nunnally's	Tribble and Griffin
Essex Florist	Peebles	T-Town Tack
EVB	River Fitness	VA Barbecue
Ferebee's	River Wash Car Wash	Wingmont Kennels

Upcoming Events

Oct 8 **3rd Annual Fall Evening Gala**
1728 Old Courthouse/Beale Church
6 pm - 10 pm

Winter **Family Day at ECMHS**
"Daily Life in Old Virginia"
Date - TBA



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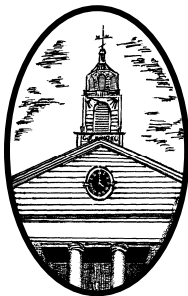
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Essex County Museum Hours
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Admission is always free



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