

Civil War – Overview

Civil War Stafford County found itself between the Federal capital in Washington and the Confederate capital in Richmond. Its status as a transportation center – a gateway to Tidewater Virginia and the Central Virginia Piedmont regions -- before the war condemned it to almost continuous and devastating occupation by the forces of both armies.

In April 1861 Virginia forces (supplemented that summer by Confederate forces) occupied a defensive line along the Potomac River from Mount Vernon to the Rappahannock River. Camps along the “Potomac Line” defended the transportation corridor to Richmond, organized and trained regiments, and provided men to man artillery positions which hampered Union movements on the Potomac. During this period Virginia and the Confederacy established a “Secret Line” from Aquia and Potomac Creeks to Maryland. This line, also known as the “Underground Telegraph,” moved spies, information, critical supplies (e.g., medicines) and eventually linked spy networks and Confederate operatives in Washington, Baltimore, Philadelphia, New York and Canada. The Potomac Line went largely unchallenged as the early battles took place around Manassas. On May 31-June 1, 1861, a small shore-to-ship naval engagement, an exchange of artillery gunfire, took place at Aquia Landing (also the site of the first use of naval mines). In March 1862, it became clear that the Union would move against Richmond and Confederate forces withdrew to the more defensible area below the Rappahannock River.

In April 1862, Federal forces raided Stafford Court House and occupied Falmouth and Stafford Heights, and briefly Fredericksburg. The Department of the Rappahannock, a corps-sized (c. 30,000 soldiers) guarded approaches to Washington and supported Union operations in the Virginia Peninsula and Shenandoah Valley. This force facilitated the liberation and gainful employment of over 10,000 freed slaves, converting Stafford into a “Trail to Freedom.” Most of the freed slaves worked in support roles for the army in Stafford and in Alexandria and Washington. Aquia Landing had become a true “Gateway to Freedom.” In September 1862, the Federal force withdrew.

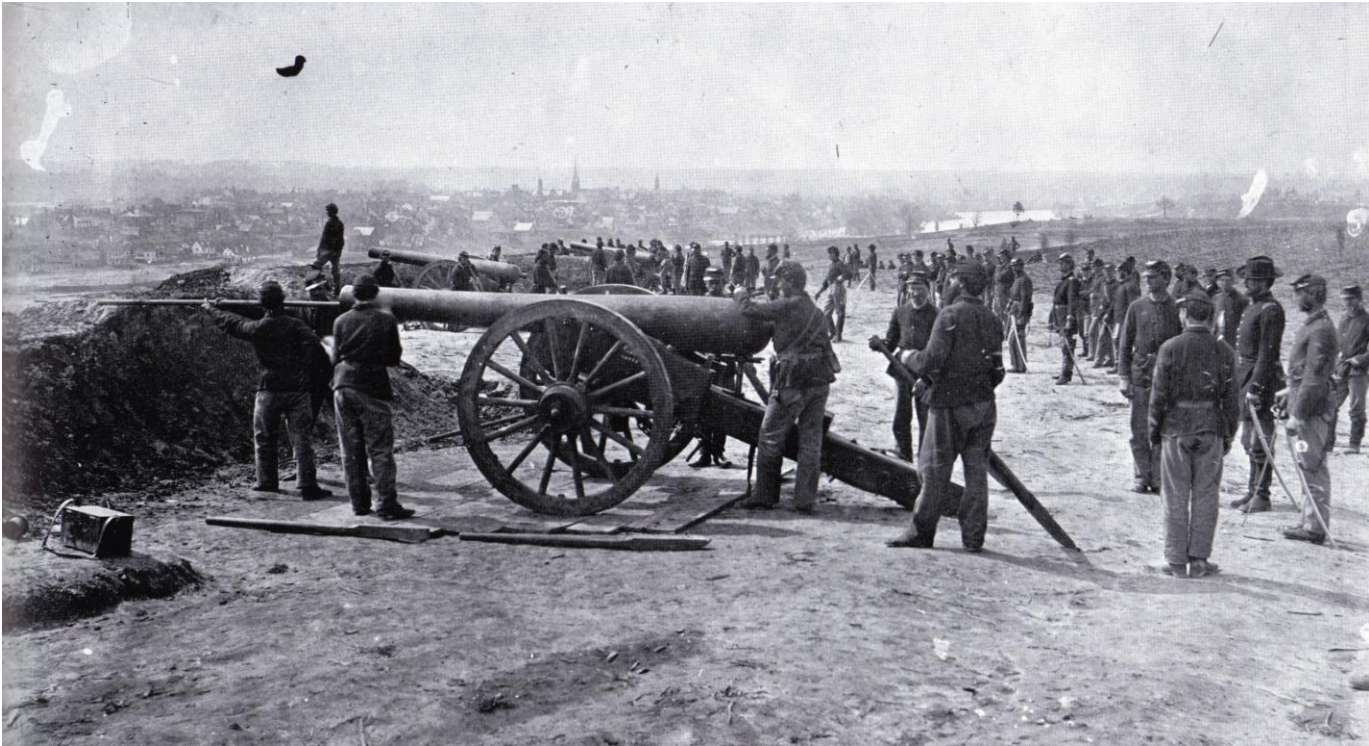
In November 1862, the Army of the Potomac – 135,000 soldiers, 60-70,000 horses and mules, 6,000 wagons and ambulances and over 400 artillery pieces – marched from Warrenton through Stafford and occupied the Stafford Heights overlooking Fredericksburg. About 75 percent of the army fought in the battle of Fredericksburg from Stafford (December 11-15, 1862). A brutal defeat for the Union, the Army of the Potomac moved into camps and set up a defensive perimeter. Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia remained on the Fredericksburg side of the Rappahannock. On January 1, 1863, coincident with the final Emancipation Proclamation, a second exodus of freed slaves passed through the Union army’s lines to Washington. In mid-January 1863, the army conducted a movement to attack Lee’s army by crossing at Bank’s and U.S. Fords up the Rappahannock in Stafford. Destruction of the clay and loam soil by the marching army and a sudden thaw and torrential rains turned Stafford into a sea of mud and stopped the Union army’s movement. Humiliated, the army returned to its camps and defensive

perimeter for the winter. During that strategic pause, the Army of the Potomac's morale and condition sunk to their lowest points in the war. However, military leadership and the soldiers' patriotism and perseverance brought about a non-battle turning point in the war and a resurgence of the army's fighting abilities. At the end of April 1863, the revitalized Army of the Potomac launched an offensive against Lee's army, initiating the battle of Chancellorsville (which included a second battle of Fredericksburg). Brilliantly planned and initially well-executed General Hooker's Union forces placed 73,000 men against Lee's forces below the Rappahannock in Spotsylvania County. Another 40,000 Union troops attacked Fredericksburg, in what was intended to encircle and trap Lee's force or drive it toward Richmond. General Lee, however, refused to withdraw, split his smaller force (half the size of the Union's army) and attacked Federals west of Chancellorsville with "Stonewall" Jackson's corps (half of Lee's army). The attack in the evening of May 2, 1863, crumpled the Federal flank and forced Hooker's army into a defensive posture. To the east, Lee's forces prevented attacks by Union troops from Fredericksburg and forced them to withdraw across the river into Stafford. Hooker's remaining forces defended until May 5th, when a general withdrawal of the army across the Rappahannock into Stafford at U.S. Ford was ordered.

The Union army then returned to its Stafford positions and resumed defense of the capital. Hooker's army had been defeated, but it was a different kind of defeat from Fredericksburg. In this instance, the army knew that it could fight effectively and was frustrated that it had let success slip through its fingers. In June 1863, Lee moved west and launched his second invasion of the North crossing the Potomac into Maryland and entering Pennsylvania with the intention of capturing Harrisburg and moving down the Susquehanna River to Baltimore and attacking Washington from the north. The Army of the Potomac left Stafford, moved north through Washington, shielding the capital and shadowed Lee into Pennsylvania. At Gettysburg, on July 1, 1863, it moved into dominant positions above the town and assumed a defensive posture. Lee's attacks over the following two days failed to dislodge the Federals and Lee was forced to terminate his invasion and withdraw to Virginia. He would never again mount a strategic offensive. The army which had turned around its fortunes in Stafford County had finally defeated its formidable enemy. After Gettysburg a series of minor battles took place near Bristoe and Mine Run in the fall and winter of 1863, and both armies again went into winter camps.

In the winter of 1864, General U.S. Grant after a series of successful campaigns in the West was placed in command of all the Union armies. In the spring of 1864, he launched the Overland Campaign which drove the Confederate forces back through a series of battles (Wilderness, Spotsylvania Court House, North Anna, and Cold Harbor) into defenses around Richmond. Stafford saw its last major involvement in the war during the Overland Campaign when Belle Plain and Aquia Landing were again used as resupply and transportation bases and handled wounded and prisoners in large numbers. In June 1864, these bases were shifted to Port Royal on the Rappahannock and City Point (now Hopewell) on the James River near Richmond. A raid by Mosby's 43rd Virginia Partisan Rangers took place at Belle Plain in May 1864.

In April 1865, Stafford's Civil War soldiers returned to a desolated and defeated land. Destruction had been nearly complete and Stafford's recovery would take a century. About 1,000 Stafford men had fought in the Confederate forces – mostly in the 47th, 30th, 40th and 55th Virginia Infantry Regiments, the 9th Virginia Cavalry Regiment, and the Stafford Light Artillery. Those Staffordians who remained notoriously remained loyal to the Confederate cause, assisting cavalry reconnaissance, spying and refusing to trade with the occupying Federal forces. There were exceptions – a number of citizens were deemed sufficiently loyal to receive postwar compensation from the Southern Claims Commission. Several actively spied for the Union at great personal risk. A number of former Union soldiers returned and became Staffordians themselves.



Union soldiers on Stafford Heights overlooking the town of Fredericksburg.