

‘Daring Beyond Precedent’: One Union Officer’s Bravery at Shepherdstown



Courtesy of the Ronn Palm Museum

Scott Hartwig, HISTORYNET
May 2021

A Union officer’s heroism at Shepherdstown awed both friend and foe

As the soldiers of the rookie 118th Pennsylvania Infantry waited on the Virginia bank of the Potomac River for orders the morning of September 20, 1862, Captain Francis P. Donaldson spotted Lieutenant Lemuel L. Crocker nearby. The two were from different companies, but Donaldson, a veteran with previous service in the 71st Pennsylvania, had taken a liking to the friendly, powerfully built Crocker, a New Yorker from the Empire State capital of Albany. In 1851, Crocker had moved to Philadelphia, where he worked as a merchant before accepting a commission as a lieutenant in the 118th—known as the “Corn Exchange Regiment.” On September 20, he had served for a mere 34 days.

The position they occupied that morning reminded Donaldson of Ball’s Bluff, Va., with its steep bluffs lining the river, site of a fierce battle in October 1861. Now, three days after the Battle of Antietam, the 118th was part of a reconnaissance in

force by the 5th Corps across the Potomac in the direction of Shepherdstown, Va., and points south, to determine the direction the Confederate army had taken after its retreat from Sharpsburg.

Soon, the unit was ordered to join other regiments of its brigade up on the bluffs. By the time they reached the summit, however, the Federals were under attack by the Confederate division of Maj. Gen. A.P. Hill. To its horror, the 118th learned early in the engagement that many of its Enfield 1853 pattern rifles were defective. In some cases, the hammer spring of those weapons was not strong enough for the hammer to break the percussion cap; in others, the nipple, where the percussion cap was placed, would break off when struck by the hammer. Both defects rendered those weapons useless.

Company officers such as Donaldson and Crocker frantically searched along the lines of their companies for functioning weapons that other soldiers had dropped. When Donaldson and Crocker encountered one another, Crocker exclaimed, “God! Captain, was Ball’s Bluff like this?” to which Donaldson replied, “Crocker, we are beaten and you had better look to the rear for a safe retreat for the men.”

Bedlam soon engulfed the regiment, which finally “broke in wild confusion for the river.” Hill’s men swarmed along the bluffs and into an abandoned cement mill near the riverbank and proceeded to pick off the panicked Pennsylvanians as they attempted to ford the river to safety back in Maryland. Two days later, in a letter to his parents, Crocker recalled, “We retreated amidst such a shower of lead I never want to take the risk again of

coming out of.” He admitted, “I was cool and collected during my travel by the river-side,” but that when he reached the mill dam, which many were using to cross the river to safety, “I think my cheek blanched, for it seemed to me certain death to cross it.”

Donaldson, who had been nearby, wrote how much of the regiment, “beaten, dismayed, wild with fright, all order and discipline gone, were rushing headlong towards the dam.”



Union troops hid from hostile gunfire in these Boteler's Cement Mill kilns located along the Potomac River. Friendly Union artillery fire killed a number of them. (Photo by Melissa A. Winn)

What may have saved Crocker's life and enabled him to cross safely was the arrival of the 1st U.S. Sharpshooters, who lined the drained bank of the nearby C&O Canal and cleared the bluffs of Confederates. After the fighting subsided some 20 men of the regiment, both wounded and those “whose courage had given out,” remained on the Virginia bank, too terrified to attempt the passage over the river. Crocker and Captain John B. Isler, commanding the Sharpshooters, boldly walked up and down the riverbank in an effort to induce those soldiers to

cross but realized they were too terror-stricken to move. Crocker quickly stripped off his uniform jacket and, covered by the rifles of the Sharpshooters and survivors of his regiment, forded the Potomac, getting each one of the men across safely.

Crocker was furious at the ineptitude that had led to the slaughter in his regiment. Whoever ordered the reconnaissance “ought to be court-martialed,” he wrote his parents. Unknown to Crocker, the carnage had resulted largely because his colonel, Charles M. Prevost, a brave but inexperienced officer, had refused to recognize an order to retreat because it had not come through proper channels.

Upset to see his regiment's dead lying strewn along the line of retreat, Crocker the next morning asked his brigade commander, Colonel James Barnes, whether Barnes could request 5th Corps commander Maj. Gen. Fitz John Porter to send a flag of truce across the river so the wounded could be retrieved, and the dead buried. Barnes' inquiry received “a flat, emphatic refusal.” There would be no flag of truce.

Crocker, however, couldn't abide the decision, and “in positive disregard of instructions” he forded the Potomac alone, dressed in his full officer's uniform and carrying his sword and pistol. Watching incredulously, Donaldson declared Crocker's bravery “beyond my comprehension.”

Crocker climbed the bluffs and carried the bodies of two captains and a lieutenant down to the river. By the time he carried their bodies to the river, he was “absolutely covered with blood and dirt.” Word of what he was doing had

made its way to 5th Corps headquarters and Porter dispatched an aide to call for an immediate end to Crocker's mission of mercy. Spotting the lieutenant on the riverbank, the aide shouted across that if Crocker did not return to the Maryland bank at once, they would shell him out with a battery. Crocker was not easily intimidated. He shouted back, "Shell and be damned," and went on with his work.

Upon returning to the bluffs, he was confronted by a Confederate general, possibly Fitz Lee, and his staff. They demanded to know what he was doing and on whose authority he had crossed into Confederate lines. Crocker explained himself and added, "humanity and decency demanded that they [the dead & wounded] be properly cared for." Since no one else was attempting to do this, "he had determined to risk the consequences and discharge the duty himself."

The general asked Crocker how long he had been in the service. "Twenty days" was the reply. He told Crocker to continue his work and pointed out a boat near the Virginia shore that could be used to transport the bodies across, even deploying cavalry pickets to protect Crocker from other Confederate troops who might not know his mission.

After crossing the river with the bodies of the officers and a wounded private from his company, Crocker was hauled before General Porter. The commander reprimanded the lieutenant, acquainting him with the military laws that established flags of truce and how he had violated those laws.

But a reprimand was his only punishment. As the historian of the 118th observed, "there was something about the whole

affair so honest, so earnest, and so true, that there was a disposition to temporize with the stern demands of discipline." Porter likely also recognized the same thing in Crocker that his friend Donaldson had; "The daring of this man Crocker is beyond all precedent." The army needed every Crocker it had.

Scott Hartwig writes from the crossroads of Gettysburg. He thanks Jeffery Stocker, who shared Lemuel Crocker's letter to his parents, originally published in the October 2, 1862, issue of the Buffalo (N.Y.) Advocate.

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General Isaac C.M. Bassett: The Brevet Brigadier Who Rushed the Enemy



Courtesy of Frank Jastrzemski



Bassett, a two-war veteran, was only 40 when he died. (U.S. Senate Collection)

Frank Jastrzembski, HISTORYNET
May 2021

In May 1863, the Rev. John A. McKean departed Pennsylvania with a grim task. He had to retrieve the remains of Major Isaac C.M. Bassett of the 82nd Pennsylvania Infantry, who reportedly had been killed during the Second Battle of Fredericksburg. One can only guess the reverend's reaction when he discovered that the major was actually alive and well. In the process of storming Marye's Heights, the 82nd's color-bearer was shot down. Bassett picked up the regiment's colors and cried to his men, "Follow me," then rushed and personally planted the colors on the enemy position. Newspapers falsely listed his name among the other senior officers of his brigade who had been killed or wounded during the assault on the entrenched heights.

On December 15, 1846, the 17-year-old Bassett had volunteered for the Mexican War as a private in the 1st Pennsylvania Infantry, only to be discharged nearly a month later after his superiors discovered he was a minor. In the interwar years, he lived in Philadelphia and worked as a coal merchant.

Bassett was commissioned a captain in the 82nd Pennsylvania on August 24, 1861. He was promoted to major on February 7, 1863, and to colonel on May 3, 1863, just in time to take command of the regiment and lead it at Gettysburg that summer. During the bloodletting at Cold Harbor in June 1864, the 82nd suffered 173 casualties, half of its effective strength. Bassett was among the casualties. His left index finger was mangled by an enemy shell and a bullet pierced the palm of his left hand close to

the thumb, lodging in his arm near the elbow joint. A surgeon amputated his damaged finger after the battle. The bullet eventually worked its way down toward the opening of his wound and was then extracted. The subsequent surgery left him unable ever to clasp his left hand again.

On December 12, 1864, Bassett was brevetted brigadier general, although the brevet was not confirmed until February 14, 1865. He was later recognized "for distinguished services in the assault on the enemy's lines near Petersburg, April 2, 1865, and for conspicuous gallantry at the battle at Little Sailor's Creek, Va., April 6, 1865." With stars adorning his shoulders, won for his capable leadership and bravery during the war, Bassett led the battle-hardened veterans of the 82nd with their bullet-riddled colors, draped with crape to honor President Abraham Lincoln, during the Grand Review in Washington, D.C., in 1865. The regiment was mustered out on July 13, 1865.

Bassett outlived the war barely four years. Just 40, he died of acute peritonitis in Philadelphia on October 2, 1869. *The Philadelphia Inquirer* declared that "his sudden death will be deplored by a large circle of friends and acquaintances."

He was originally buried at Philadelphia's now-gone Odd Fellows Cemetery, but his remains were reinterred at Lawnview Cemetery in Rockledge, Pa., during the 1950s. Barrett's grave remained unmarked until a veteran headstone was placed there in 2020.

The First Into Richmond?

Bert Dunkerly, April 2, 2021
blueandgrayeducation.org



Lithograph depicting the Evacuation Fire (Currier & Ives, 1865) | Library of Congress

The events surrounding the capture of Richmond on April 3, 1865, generated their fair share of controversies. For decades veterans debated the sequence of events, who marched in first, and who raised the first flag. Yet by the late 20th century, these were largely forgotten, and few historians today investigate the capture of Richmond. The front lines around Fort Harrison, 10 miles southeast of Richmond, had been stagnant for months, with both sides settled into a monotonous routine. Then suddenly, the boredom ended with rapid activity. The Union soldiers who woke up here on April 3 would be spending the night in Richmond. Analyzing these events reveals a fascinating series of actions, and I have tried to organize them chronologically as best I could, based on the writings from different observers.

The better-known Army of the Potomac battled for four years to take Richmond, yet the more obscure and less successful Army of the James took it. Troops who didn't have much luck or glory otherwise earned the honor of capturing the Confederate capital. The Union lines east of the city were

occupied by the 24th and all-black 25th Corps of the Army of the James, under the command of Gen. Godfrey Weitzel

On April 2 Union forces broke through at Petersburg, 20 miles to the south. That afternoon and overnight along the lines near Richmond, explosions were heard, and a red glow lit the sky. Weitzel had his troops on alert and ready to move at dawn.



Ruins on Main Street, sketched by A. W. Warren for Harper's Weekly | LOC

Lt. Royal B. Prescott with the 13th New Hampshire wrote on April 2: "About the middle of the afternoon . . . I noticed several army wagons being loaded up and field artillery moving away, and a general air of bustle and activity pervading the enemy's camps. I sent news of this to Gen'l Ripley, and received in reply 'Keep your eyes and ears open.' As darkness came on, these signs increased. There was something ominous in the very air, a feeling that great crisis was at hand. No man slept that night. Each stood ready, musket in hand, for whatever might happen. At . . . half-past four on the morning of the 3rd, there came a sudden blinding glare of light, a concussion that shook the earth and nearly threw us to the ground, and immediately after the . . . Officer of the day . . . galloped up and ordered me to advance the picket line . . . and it was believed that Richmond was being evacuated. "

The sun rose around 6:30 that morning, but long before full daylight, Union troops were

up. The night before, as the Confederates destroyed supplies, fires raged out of control. In addition, mobs broke into stores and looted freely. The city was in chaos by dawn.

Perhaps the first Union soldier in the city, now devoid of Confederate troops, was Lt. William Ladd of the 13th New Hampshire. On his initiative he rode forward and described his journey alone into the city early that morning: “I was in the Capitol grounds as early as 530 am. I saw no flag on the Capitol at that time. After looking about the grounds and vicinity for a few minutes, and realizing I was alone in the city, I rode back toward Rocketts, and when near there met a white Union Cavalryman—the first Union soldier I had seen in Richmond that morning.”



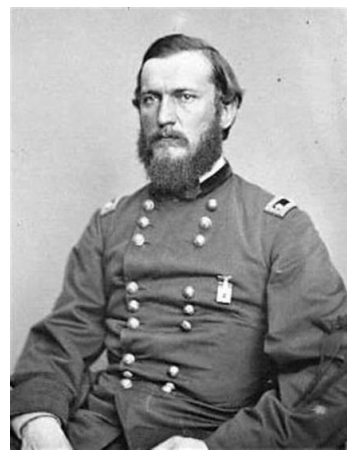
Captured siege guns at Rocketts | LOC

Then he did something extraordinary. Seeing several Confederate ironclad ships anchored in the river nearby, he jumped from his horse and rowed in a boat to the closest ship. According to Ladd: “He quickly ran up the mast, secured the flag, and had just stepped ashore when the magazine blew up and scattered the gunboat in fragments from bank to bank.” It was a Hollywood-type moment.

In the meantime, Weitzel ordered a reconnaissance by 40 troopers from the 4th Massachusetts Cavalry. The troopers rode up the New Market Road (now Route 5) from the Union lines toward the city. As the infantry prepared to advance behind them, several Confederate deserters came in, telling of the evacuation of Richmond.

Trooper William Arnold wrote of what happened as the cavalry neared the intersection of Osborn Turnpike and the New Market Road: “In the distance were mounted men and carriages. We halted and Major Stevens and his officers went forward and conferred with the party, who proved to be the Mayor of Richmond accompanied by Judge Meredith and other prominent people of Richmond. The city was formally surrendered to Major Stevens . . .”

Mayor Joseph Mayo asked the Union troops to enter the city and restore law and order. Stevens assured him they would, and accompanied the mayor into the city. The troopers took the New Market Road as it descended to the city. Arnold wrote: “We then went forward at a rapid pace, and coming round a turn in the roadway at Rocketts, came in full view of Richmond.” Later General Weitzel met with Mayo to discuss the city’s occupation.



Gen. Godfrey Weitzel | LOC

It must have been an incredible experience. From their vantage, the city spread out before them along the James River. The object of four years of war was in full view, exposed and ready for the taking. Arnold continues: “We halted for a moment to contemplate the scene. A portion of the city along the James river was on fire. The black smoke was rolling up in great volumes. Major Stevens said, “Every one of us should feel as proud as if we were promoted to be Brigadier Generals. We gave three cheers and went on and were soon in the streets of Richmond passing Libby Prison; and we clattered up the paved street on the gallop to the Capitol . . .”

Arnold recorded the surreal experience here: “Major Stevens, with some of the officers, rushed into the building and soon the guidons of Company I and H were fluttering from the top of the building. We were formed around the equestrian statue of Washington . . . Richmond was ours, after four long years of tremendous struggle and sacrifice. I, for one, thought of the services of thousands of the best troops ever rallied to maintain a just cause. That our detail was privileged to land first in Richmond with the flags of Massachusetts was certainly appreciated by us.”

By about 7 o’clock, various Union troops had marched in from their siege lines and were staging at Rockett’s Landing, the wharf on the city’s outskirts. Gen. Edward Ripley, commanding the 98th New York, 13th New Hampshire, and 9th Vermont, was told to assemble his men for a formal march into the city. The cavalrymen rode out, retracing their route, and passing the assembled infantrymen at Rockett’s Landing.

Ripley wrote: “I was also ordered to dress up my own command and put all my regimental bands at the head of the column. I happened to have the unusual number of

three.” The Union troops marched in on Main Street, turning up 14th Street, and left onto Bank Street, reaching the Capitol grounds around eight o’clock. From there they spread out to secure the area, fight fires, and establish law and order.

Four Union flags flew over the Virginia State Capitol that day: The two guidons of the 4th Massachusetts Cavalry, a flag hidden by an enslaved person at the start of the war and brought out that day, and a United States flag that had flown over Union headquarters in New Orleans. This large national flag replaced the two cavalry guidons. It is not clear when the other flag, which had flown over the capitol until secession, was raised. The flag from New Orleans is today on display at the Virginia Museum of History and Culture.



The Virginia State Capitol today | author photo



Richmond's main street today | author photo

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‘Road to Freedom’ Tour Highlights Civil-Era Black Experience

Self-guided map and app unites stories of African American heroes, historic places and events

American Battlefield Trust February 22, 2021

(Washington, D.C.) — A new curated tour offers insights into the African American experience during the Civil War-era by bringing together the stories of war and the fight for emancipation through battlefields, churches, cemeteries, highway makers and other historic places.

The “Road to Freedom” program, created through a partnership between the American Battlefield Trust and Civil War Trails, Inc., offers free physical and digital manifestations — a map guide available in visitor centers and distribution sites across the state and a web app with downloadable versions for Android and iOS devices. The trail highlights 88 spots across Virginia, a key Civil War battleground state and an important passageway in the Underground Railroad. Sites stretch from Alexandria, just

outside Washington, D.C., to Abingdon, near the Tennessee border, and tell stories of soldiers, slaves, educators, politicians and others, marking the places where they staged rebellions, fought for freedom, educated their children, were born and were buried.



American Battlefield Trust and Civil War Trails, Inc.

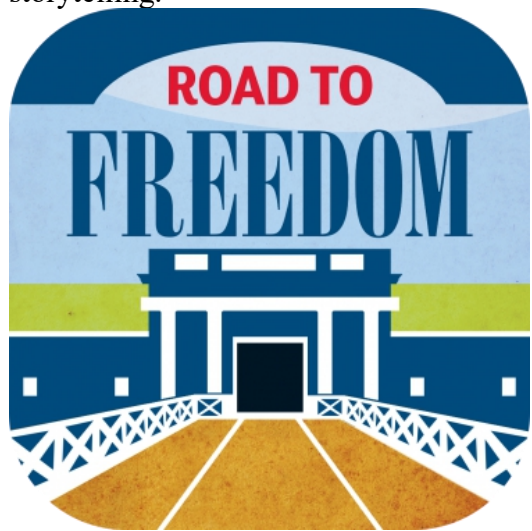
“The contributions and experiences of African Americans during our nation’s first century have traditionally gone under-told,” said Trust President David Duncan. “Through preservation opportunities and outreach initiatives, we have the ability to elevate these stories for this and future generations.”

The program is designed to be flexible. Travelers can seek out a single stop, find a destination along an existing journey, or plan an adventure exploring several sites grouped by theme or proximity. The eight sites in the city of Alexandria or seven in Richmond could all be visited in one day, while finding the six included historic cemeteries would cover 434 miles and clock nearly eight hours of drive-time.

Content and maps for the Road to Freedom were created in collaboration with the Civil War Trails Inc., a nonprofit that encourages heritage tourism across Maryland, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Virginia and West Virginia.

“Historic sites across the Commonwealth constitute an open-air museum,” said Civil War Trails Executive Director Drew Gruber. “The more and the wider variety of them that one explores, the richer the understanding of our shared history that emerges.”

Virginia Tourism Corporation CEO Rita McClenny agreed, adding, “The ‘Road to Freedom network provides a powerful opportunity for visitors and Virginians alike to explore these poignant and often under-told stories of resilience, strength and community. These stories helped to shape our history, and allow visitors to connect with the past through a new lens of authentic storytelling.”



The Road to Freedom app is GPS-enabled, but images and historical content can be accessed from anywhere on the globe. The free app is now available for download via the App Store and Google Play, or online as a web app, available through any

browser. Learn more at www.battlefields.org/RoadtoFreedom. An ongoing research partnership with the African American Heritage Preservation Foundation will result in adding further context to existing entries by allowing Black voices to delve into the artistic, architectural and cultural significance of included sites. The addition of new sites and curated “collections” will further enhance the experience. “Since 1994, the African American Heritage Preservation Foundation has worked toward the preservation, maintenance, and awareness of endangered or little-known historical sites, especially in the mid-Atlantic,” said president and founder E. Renée Ingram. “We are excited to join this dynamic project and look forward to showcasing the history and legacy of important places across Virginia.”

Between the map guide and free app, the Road to Freedom features scores of sites from museums to battlefields to historic cemeteries pertaining to key topics in African American history, such as slavery, emancipation, the United States Colored Troops, and Reconstruction — and the proactive role that those men and women took in forging their own narratives. One highlight of the network is the New Market Heights Battlefield, where, in September 1864, 14 members of the U.S. Colored Troops exhibited exceptional valor for which they were awarded the Medal of Honor. The Trust recently announced the preservation of an additional 22 acres at New Market Heights. Learn more about this work at www.battlefields.org/fighting-for-freedom.

The American Battlefield Trust is dedicated to preserving America's hallowed battlegrounds and educating the public about what happened there and why it

matters today. The nonprofit, nonpartisan organization has protected more than 53,000 acres associated with the Revolutionary War, War of 1812 and Civil War. Learn more at www.battlefields.org.

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