

Volume 4, Number 2

Spring 2005

2005 Annual Meeting, Talk & Tour

As in previous years, the RBA annual meeting is an opportunity for members and friends to gather at a Civil War site around Richmond. In the past we have attempted to offer access to something unique. In 2003 we held the event at the property purchased by the RBA at Fort Harrison. Last year we had permission to tour a key segment of the Glendale/Fraser's Farm battlefield. This year, on June 11, we are heading off the primary roads into the heart of the Cold Harbor battlefield, walking in the footsteps of the Eighteenth Corps in its assaults of June 1 and June 3, 1864, at the Allison Farm.

There is excellent news regarding the battlefield tour. Author **Gordon Rhea** has agreed to lead the group. His name will be familiar to virtually every reader of this newsletter. In the past decade he has produced four fine books on the Overland Campaign, with his most recent effort being a detailed look at the Battle of Cold Harbor up through the June 3 fighting. Rhea is in high demand as a speaker and tour leader, but remains very busy practicing law all over the hemisphere. We owe his presence on June 11 to his enthusiasm for battlefield preservation in general, and for Cold Harbor specifically.

Because he is trying cases in June, Rhea warns that there is a tiny chance that something may arise to prevent him from reaching Cold Harbor for the annual meeting. But he fully expects to be there, and authorized the RBA to advertise him in good faith as the leader of the battlefield tour.

The event, which is free, begins at 9.00 a.m. at Beulah Church, less than one mile north of the historic Old Cold Harbor crossroads. (See the map on the back page for directions). It should last approximately half a day. The walk will cover approximately two miles. Light refreshments will be provided in mid-morning.

Allison's Farm at Cold Harbor

On two occasions, only 36 hours apart, different segments of the Union Eighteenth Corps assaulted the Confederates of Joseph B. Kershaw's division. Like so much of the action at Cold Harbor, these two events have no separate identity. Their details often are rolled into the general story of the great battle. Undoubtedly this is so because the ground is not preserved, and generally is not accessible.

The June 11 tour will offer any interested member or guest the opportunity to see this slice of the battle-

field in the company of the battle's leading historian, Gordon Rhea. What follows is in the nature of preparation--a sketchy overview

of the specific things that make this ground so historic. Further reading or re-reading will be helpful. In addition to Rhea's book,

there is Ernest Furgurson's excellent volume on the battle. Additionally, the classic memoirs of E. Porter Alexander and Theodore Lyman offer insight into this subject.

The first action at Allison's Farm (scene of this year's tour) occurred on the morning of June 1, when Kershaw's division advanced east and south through the farm in a



General William F. "Baldy" Smith established his headquarters (shown here) in a grove of trees across the road from Beulah Church. "We paid a long visit to 'Baldy' Smith," wrote staff officer Theodore Lyman. "His tent was much better than General Meade's and he displayed, for his benefit, a lunch with champagne, etc., that quite astonished us."

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Allison's Farm (cont.)

Continued from page 1

failed effort to retake the Old Cold Harbor crossroads. Having failed there, R. E. Lee shifted his focus to blocking the Federal army's direct path to Richmond. The divisions of Kershaw and Hoke established a modest line of entrenchments about two-thirds of a mile west of the crossroads. Other Confederate formations began shuttling south from the old lines at Totopotomoy Creek.

Generals Grant and Meade had transferred two corps--the Sixth and Eighteenth--to Old Cold Harbor and by noon on June 1 had recognized an offensive opportunity. Once in place, those two formations attacked westward early in the evening. They fractured the Confederate line in its center. On the Allison Farm, the brigades of Henry and Burnham anchored the right flank of the Union attack line. Their charge, while moderately successful, did not reap the great fruits enjoyed by their comrades farther south. With no flanking movement to assist them, Henry and Burnham incurred heavy losses while capturing a strong line of Confederate entrenchments. The Southerners, however, simply fell back a few hundred yards to an even more formidable position. The two Federal brigades lost roughly 450 men killed and wounded in this episode. Confederate casualties are not of record.

A period of hasty entrenching followed. The uncaptured portion of the Confederate line retreated to a more comfortable position and soldiers worked diligently to build and strengthen new positions on the night of June 2. What became the primary Confederate line ran diagonally in front of the Allison House. Two ravines

anchored Kershaw's position there. One, just north of the Allison House, protected his left, while another farther south represented Kershaw's right flank. The sandy field in front had little variety or slope, but was boxed on three sides (north, south, and east) by ravines.

The Army of the Potomac's famous attack on June 3, commencing at 4.30 a.m., actually occurred at several discrete loca-

brigade seems to have done the most damage, shooting down trapped and ineffectual Federal infantryman by rows, sometimes quite literally. Unwilling to go further forward, or to retrace their steps, the survivors of this charge faced 14 more hours of daylight. They scooped out depressions to protect themselves, and in the 12th New Hampshire Infantry some men piled up the bodies of dead comrades as makeshift breastworks.

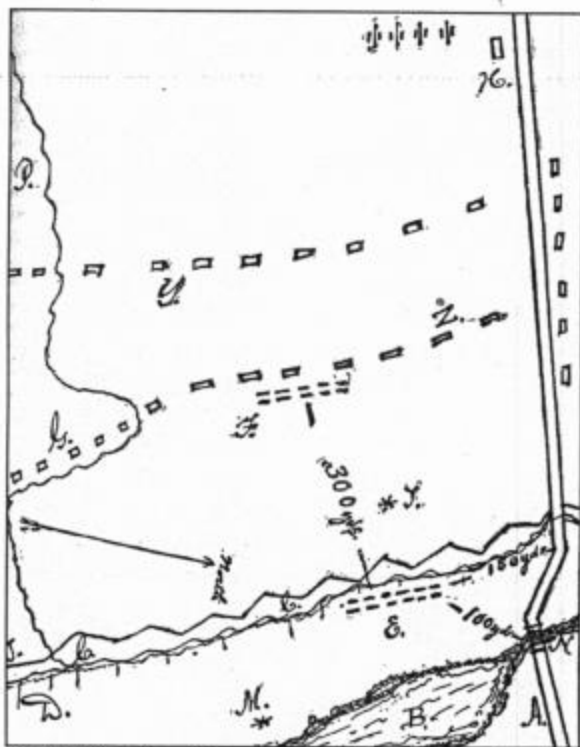
The armies fought on Allison's Farm, from those positions, for the next nine days. Federal artillery wheeled up to a surprisingly short range and built lunettes for protection (some of which we will see on the June 11 tour). Sharpshooters ruled during the daylight hours.

Sometime not long after the armies left, the local farmers destroyed the Confederate entrenchments on the Allison Farm. They also plowed away some (but not all) of the Union positions.

Albert Allison was the man whose farm suffered from the presence of the contending troops. Mr. Allison had a wife and at least six children (all daughters). He had endured five weeks of occupation in 1862, and his farm stood on the periphery of the Battle of Gaines's Mill as well. Now the 65-year-old farmer

returned to his shell-blasted home to face the ordeal of repairing his ruined farm. One of Mr. Allison's sons-in-law recorded the scene: "The house had been riddled. You could see right through the roof and anywhere....We went in and discovered that the cannon-balls had struck the feather beds, and the feathers were strewn all over the rooms. It looked like a goose nest in there."

Despite the battle's heavy impact, the farm retains much of its historic appearance today.



The 15th New Hampshire produced one of the great unit histories of the Civil War. This 1880's map shows key ground associated with that regiment's experience. This is the area we will tour. We will see the ruins of the Allison House (H), the pond (B), the historic road (A), and the sharp ridge (C) where so many Union infantrymen formed up for their crucial attacks on June 1 and June 3.

tions. On the Allison Farm, defending Confederates were jubilant when they found that the Eighteenth Corps's contribution to the big attack consisted of two veteran brigades--just 2400 men on a narrow front. The Federals of Stedman's and Stannard's brigades endured some of the war's worst slaughter in the Allison Field, and many of the familiar, chilling accounts from Cold Harbor originated from those soldiers.

Evander Law's Alabama

Beulah Church During the War

This Presbyterian church was erected not long before the war. Many of the families whose homes and farms would figure prominently in nearby Civil War battles contributed to its construction. Dr. William Gaines, of "Powhite," used his sawmill at Gaines's Mill to saw all the timber used by the builders. Mr. and Mrs. David Woody, whose house stood just north of the church, were among its chief advocates.

Mr. Woody, in fact, was not the dominant member of the marriage. A former preacher at Beulah Church once wrote that their house "was known as Mrs. Woody's, as though she were a widow." According to a local tale, in 1862 a hapless Union officer had an opportunity to learn of Mrs. Woody's strong personality. He imprudently boasted to her that McClellan's army would "have your old rebel capital in a few days; we can see the spires of the churches from our breastworks." Mrs. Woody tartly replied: "I read in my Bible that Moses climbed the mountains and saw the Promised Land, but he never got there."

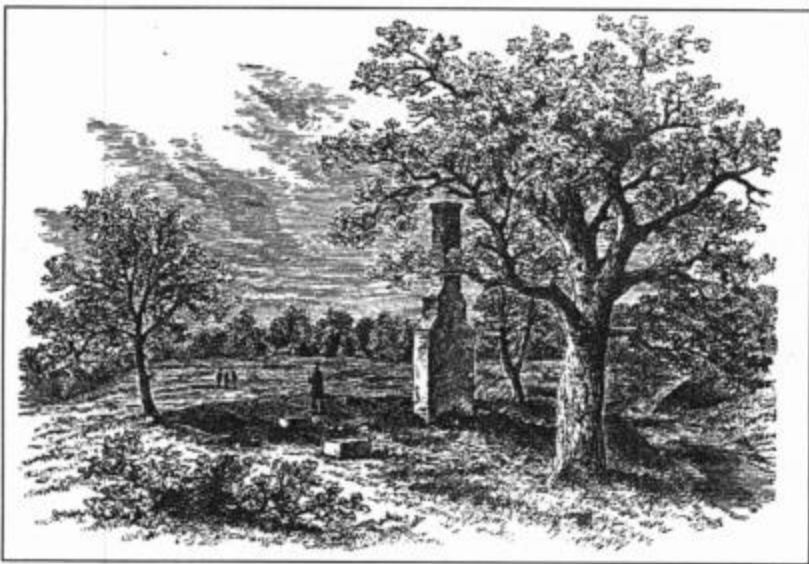
Situated just north of the Old Cold Harbor crossroads, Beulah Church came under long range Union artillery fire on June 27, 1862, at the Battle of Gaines's Mill. Nearly all of the men in "Stonewall" Jackson's Confederate column stood for a time in the road in front of the church before peeling off to the south and southwest on their way to the front lines. Reverend Thomas W. Hooper, who preached at Beulah, recorded much later that in June 1862 the "settees had been scattered through the woods...the

windows were removed, the doors used for amputating tables, and the floor stained with blood. But in a short time we got the house in order, and resumed our services."

Two years later the church burned to the ground on June 1, 1864, during some of the fighting associated with the beginning of the Battle of Cold Harbor. The precise details of its destruction have not surfaced, although the wartime preacher and other local sources maintain that Federal soldier-arsonists were to blame. Whatever the truth of the matter, the church did not rise from the ashes immediately. As late as 1868 Dr. Gaines was in Baltimore, Maryland, trying to raise money to erect a replacement church.

Today the church sits on top of, or very close to, its Civil War location. Unfortunately, there are no known sketches or photographs of the wartime building available for comparison.

A series of Union entrenchments survives behind (east of) the church, but a new housing development is under construction there now. Members attending the tour will see the newly built access road for the development directly beside the church parking lot. Across the fields to the north is Mrs. Woody's home, mostly rebuilt since the war, but still a valuable landmark for battlefield tramps.



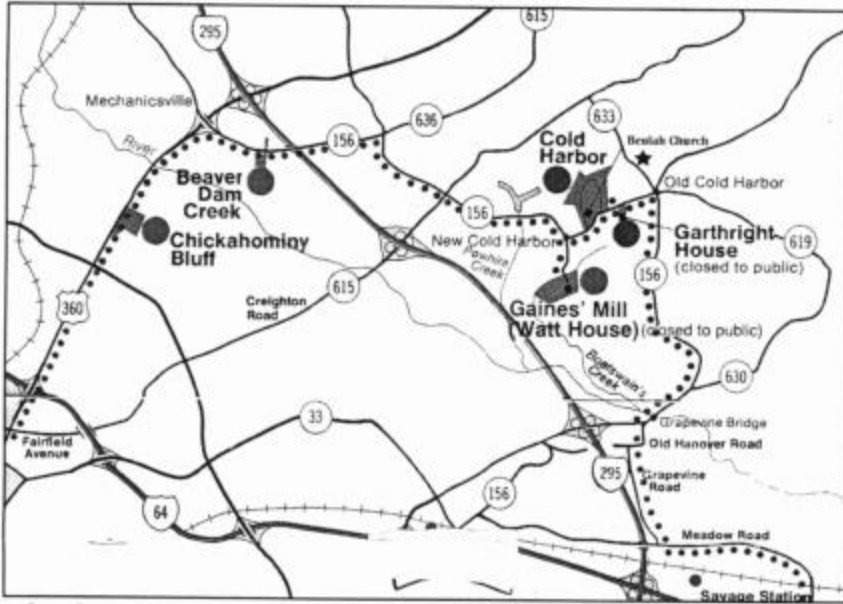
This 1866 sketch is one of the few early views of the Cold Harbor battlefield. It is from the perspective of an Eighteenth Corps soldier, looking west toward the Confederate line in the trees. Although the precise location is not certain, the chimney in the foreground might be the ruins of the M. Boze House, just south of Beulah Church.

On *Richmond's*
FRONT LINE

is published for the RBA membership at P.O. Box 13945, Richmond, VA 23225. The web address is: www.saverichmondbattlefields.org. The RBA is chartered as a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization. All contributions are tax deductible. A financial statement is available, upon request, from the Virginia Office of Consumer Affairs.

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Adapted from the park service map, to show location of Beulah Church, north of Old Cold Harbor and east of the National Park Service Visitor Center.

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