

On Richmond's FRONT LINE

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The Malvern Hill Brick

Devotees of Ebay, collectibles shows, auction catalogues, and other forms of Civil War memorabilia commerce might recognize the so-called "Malvern Hill brick," which appears on the market from time to time. It is nothing more than a red brick, of customary shape, but with a unique raised inscription on its face. Its story is connected to battlefield preservation.

The extremely fertile soil of the Malvern Hill battlefield continued to produce lucrative crops in the immediate post-war years. The Crew family cultivated their side of the battlefield; the Dews

worked the farm on which sat the Malvern Hill house. Perhaps the Dews became land poor. At any rate, they were obliged to sell their beautiful farm before the end of the century. In 1887, a man named Henry P. Mercereau purchased the farm, the historic 17th century Malvern Hill house, and much of the battlefield. He was a Civil War veteran and a proud owner of the famous battlefield. But he was neither a Virginian nor a Confederate. He served for three years in the 14th Ohio Infantry. His regiment fought in the western theater, at Chickamauga and most notably in the Atlanta campaign.

Mercereau enjoyed his status as a carpetbagger. By his own account "a ----- Yankee is holding the place, which most of the natives don't like, and they have done their level best to down me and drive me from the country." This aroused Mercereau's ire. He felt obliged to defend the honor of the 14th Corps. To do so, he determined to erect a memorial to

He produced an unknown quantity of them, made "from clay taken from the position occupied by one of our batteries July 1, 1862, on which is inscribed Malvern Hill, with date of battle. There is also a cannon unlimbered for action, a broken sword, and cannon-balls lying upon the ground are also depicted." The bricks sold for fifty cents each, plus shipping.

Mercereau promised to dedicate twenty-five cents from each sale to his Abraham Lincoln monument.

Within one year of his announcement, Mercereau had sold the farm to a man named Hale

from New York City. The Lincoln monument at Malvern Hill never got off the ground, and the record does not indicate whether Mercereau refunded the twenty-five cents per brick to everyone who had purchased one.

Apparently the bricks sold well during their brief window of production. They appear on the market three or four times a year, and usually fetch about \$100 - \$125.

Correction--The masthead on the last issue of this newsletter incorrectly said vol. 6, #1. It should have said vol. 6, #2.



an ex-president on his property. "I want to build a monument on the highest place on Malvern Hill, where it can be seen for 20 miles around, and want it to be a National affair, with a statue of 'Honest Old Abe Lincoln' on the top of it. Such a monument as I propose to erect could be seen from Richmond with a field glass." "Thousands of people visit the old battlefield of Malvern Hill annually," he claimed. The Ohioan felt that the Lincoln monument would only add to the battlefield's historical attractions.

To fund that enterprise, Mercereau planned to sell commemorative Malvern Hill bricks.

Christmas Letters

Once again Dennis Buttacavoli has dipped into his collection to provide RBA readers with a pair of Christmas themed soldier letters. The first is from Matthew S. Austin, a member of the 5th New Jersey Infantry. He became a company officer later in the war and survived several wounds.

Camp 5th N.J.V.
Lower Potomac
Dec. 25th 1861.

Dear Father--

To-day has been very pleasant, indeed--quite warm, sky clear, and the air as still and balmy as a midsummer's day. Last evening we had quite a sociable time in the Commissary Department--Songs, Music, "Yarns," etc., etc. (etc. means Sutler's whisky.)

I am happy to say, however, that not one of the invited guests of the commissary drank to excess. The company consisted, entirely, of com. & non com. officers. We had very excellent music, and the time passed pleasantly. Considerable drunkenness prevailed in all the camps--particularly in this one-- from the fact that the 5th's Sutler has had privileges (which are not allowed in the other reg't's) and which are in violation of certain General Orders. I hope the Sutler Department of the army will be entirely done away with, or improved in someway. All commissioned officers have the privilege of buying from the Commissary Department, at government prices--which is about one half that charged by Suters--but the men have not. There are many things the men need that could not be purchased of the commissary--but a more perfect system should be devised for supplying the men at reasonable prices. Sutler of the 5th does not sell molasses nor sugar, as the profit on them would not pay for the trouble. It, (molasses) is

always in demand--but we are not permitted to sell only to our officers. I could sell a large quantity, could I get it at this point. This is why I spoke about the price of molasses in Philadelphia. The molasses we issue, is sold to officers at 62c-- the best quality....

* * *

The second Christmas letter comes from the pen of a notorious character named Charles M. Figgatt. He was from Lexington, Virginia, served in the 1st Virginia Cavalry, and spent much of the war on detail as a clerk at 2nd Corps headquarters. His Christmas report includes much piety, army rumors, and a description of a good dinner. A summary of Figgatt's scandalous postwar * career can be found at the end of his letter.

Hd Qrs Moss Neck Rap Co

25th Dec 1862

A Happy Christmas For My Darling Wife:

Though today has passed its not too late to wish you my dear a happy time now at the time when all expect to have a merry time. But not all now for O how changed are the times and how many who were a few weeks ago were expecting a different return of this time to them have to mourn the loss of those who were want to make this occasion happy to them and oh how much have we to be grateful for to a merciful and kind Father who has wonderfully preserved us all and though not present yet the hope is left that they may yet return and loved ones so dear and not so many others mangled or numbered with the dead. Thus let us remember and give thanks not only for these blessings but more especially for knowledge of this day where so many years ago was born a babe

The Saviour Redeemer King Of Peace Son of the most high and yet more to give thanks that we can feel in our own hearts as I now do and for some weeks have felt more then ever that this Saviour is my Saviour and that by him I have an inheritance A house not made with hands. Eternally in the heavens where hope shall be - up in realization and when war, not trouble nor sin nor anything that makes us unhappy will ever come. Oh! my Saviour keep me and mine ever unto thyself that sheltered near thy side we may feel no harm through my dear friends parents, brothers, sisters, wife and those dear little ones whom thou just given us and for whom we do now pray for wisdom to guide unto thee....We have not much CHX [Christmas] here. I was working most all day and went to see Tom this evening.... We had turkey, beef, molasses, Corn Muff, Raspberry, Sugar and Fruit Cake for dinner today we generally have all these except the turkey and cake which were sent to McGuire from home. We live very well indeed sometimes have potatoes but no other vegetables. We are encamped on a magnificent Estate Moss Neck having on it one of the most splendid mansions in the state far beyond anything I ever saw and do not suppose it is surpassed by any in the state. But the owner Mr Corbin a young man has lost all his Negroes and of course will have to sell the farm for no man I suppose has money enough to buy 200 Negroes to enable him to farm it. I suppose you have heard all about the great battle & terrible defeat of the enemy. They have not been so severely punished during the war and I am in hope that this will be the last fight. I saw Genl Pendelton today and he says that Genl Lee is quite hopeful as to the end of the war from what he learns at Yankee Land. Jeb Stuart is out on another round and

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South Anna River Railroad Bridge Fight

Union raiders often threatened the various railroad bridges north of Richmond. Both the Virginia Central Railroad and the Richmond, Fredericksburg & Potomac Railroad had several vulnerable bridges. The Chickahominy, South Anna, and North Anna rivers all required sophisticated crossing. A handful of smaller streams and rivers also needed railroad bridges.

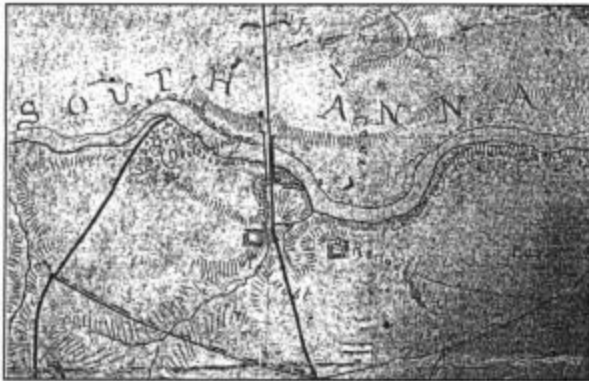
A little known affair at the Virginia Central's crossing of the South Anna River occurred on June 26, 1863. Although the primary armies maneuvered along the Maryland-Pennsylvania border then, each side had retained a small force in southeastern Virginia. Union planners hoped to strike Richmond's defenses during this vulnerable period. They chose the railroad bridges as their targets.

A force of just more than 1000 cavalrymen under Col. Samuel P. Spear disembarked at White House Landing and pushed into Hanover County on June 25. A very small contingent of North Carolinians—thought to number only about 50 men—belonging to the 44th North Carolina Infantry guarded the railroad bridge over the river.

Lt. Col. Tazewell L. Hargrove of the 44th had command of the Confederates. His men had the advantage of pre-built fortifications. Two large earthen redoubts and one blockhouse (probably wooden) sat astride the railroad on the southern bank of the river. Spear's horsemen approached from that direction and Hargrove decided to abandon his fortifications in order to fight with the river at his front rather than to his rear.

Spear's men obligingly charged across the railroad bridge. Sharp combat swirled there and on the northern bank of the South Anna. Hargrove received a few reinforcements to buttress his

position. Spear assessed his options, evaluated the defense, and decided that his best hope for success lay in flanking Hargrove. Col. Spear accordingly dispatched a few companies downriver, to a small local ford (marked as "blocked" on the best wartime Confederate map of the area). That proved to be the solution, and Spear's men advanced upriver



on the northern bank and pried Hargrove's Confederates from their chosen position.

Most of the surviving Tarheels surrendered. Colonel Spear then set fire to the bridge as instructed and moved on toward the RF&P Railroad bridge, which he failed to destroy. His command returned to the safety of White House Landing by the 27th, ending the brief raid.

Total casualties in this affair were lopsided, thanks to the flanking movement. Only 17 Federal troopers fell killed or wounded, while the North Carolinians lost 147 men. 125 of that number became prisoners of war. A post-battle Confederate report noted that "the men killed and wounded are cut with sabers, and some burned with powder from pistols." Col. Spear found "so many badly wounded" Confederates that he "paroled them on the spot, by advice of my surgeon."

Before returning to White House Landing, Spear's men stopped off near Hanover Court House and snared William Henry Fitzhugh "Rooney" Lee, the middle of R. E. Lee's three sons.

General Rooney Lee was convalescing from his Brandy Station wound at a private home when Spear's men found him.

The battle's relatively minor casualty sum belies its significance. The disruption of the Virginia Central Railroad, even briefly, alarmed Confederate leaders. The railroad was a vital cog in Virginia's supply network, most particularly when the Army of Northern Virginia operated along the Potomac.

The South Anna Bridge battlefield retains enough of its integrity to merit some preservation. The bridge occupies its original location. One of the two very large earthen redoubts that stood at the southern edge of the river is intact, and the battlefield north of the river, while not perfect, does retain some of its original appearance.

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Christmas....

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you will hear from him soon. I suppose he is after trying to find out whether or not the Yanks are going into winter qrs. I judge our troops will do the same whenever the weather sustain bad as the Artillery goes back into the country this week....And now I believe I have written all I can think of of interest and with much love for all and many kisses for the dear little boys and wishing again a happy CHX for my darling and many sweet kisses for her. Hoping to see you soon & committing you to our Father in

heaven. I am your devoted husband.

Charlie

On February 14, 1895, Charles Figgatt climbed aboard a train at Lexington. He left behind his wife on that Valentine's Day, but he did take along two suitcases filled with \$145,000, stolen from the Bank of Lexington. Figgatt's embezzlement (known locally as "Black Friday") ruined the town's only bar which was uninsured. Citizens were left to read about the unprecedented

theft and weep." The Virginia Military Institute lost \$20,000. Figgatt had been a devout churchgoer, the treasurer of the R. E. Lee monument fund, and a Sunday School Superintendent.

Local authorities eventually recouped about 70 cents on the dollar from a variety of sources, including the sale of Figgatt's house for \$6000. His abandoned wife received only \$265 from that sale.

Justice never caught up with the artificially pious ex-Confederate. He died in 1899 in Lockett, Colorado, where he lived under a false name.

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