



The Battle of Trent's Reach

DESPERATE TIMES ON THE JAMES RIVER

Behind the Dutch Gap Conservation Area in Chesterfield County is a long, shallow body of water known as Trent's Reach. Cut off long ago by the modern shipping channel at Dutch Gap, this quiet stretch of the old river is now visited by the occasional fisherman or kayaker. The 4-mile loop trail at the Dutch Gap Conservation Area follows along its edge and is a very popular spot for hikers and cyclists. Few people who visit are aware that in the shallow waters of Trent's Reach, Union and Confederate ironclads squared off in one of the last naval engagements of the Civil War.

The eastern end of Trent's Reach was occupied by Union General Benjamin F. Butler in May of 1864. Butler landed 40,000 troops at Bermuda Hundred, quickly marched west, and established a defensive line. This line began at the Appomattox River at present day R. Garland Dodd Park at Point of Rocks and stretched north until it reached the James River where the River's Bend subdivision is located today. Butler had three gun positions constructed on the bluffs overlooking the James River. These batteries named Wilcox, Parsons and Spofford commanded the one mile length of Trent's Reach. At the western end of the reach, the Confederates constructed Battery

Dantzler. This battery anchored the north end of the Howlett line that paralleled Butler's line all the way to the Appomattox River.

By mid-June of 1864 the lines in Bermuda Hundred were firmly established and the siege of Petersburg was under way. At Trent's Reach a series of obstructions and torpedoes were placed to keep the Confederate James River Squadron up river and far away from the busy supply base that was taking shape at City Point. In addition to the barrier, Union ironclads frequently entered the waters of Trent's Reach to lob shells at Battery Dantzler and to

discourage any Confederate naval excursions downriver. Union concerns at Trent's Reach were very real. While limited in its area of operations, the James River Squadron still had the ability to pack a punch in the form of three ironclads, the *Virginia II*, the *Richmond* and the *Fredericksburg*. All three ironclads had 4 guns and a crew of approximately



C.S.S. *Fredericksburg* & C.S.S. *Virginia II* under fire from Union shore batteries and the U.S.S. *Onondaga*. Copyright Tom W. Freeman, courtesy of SM&S Naval Prints, Inc. all rights reserved.

150 men. During the summer and fall of 1864 these ships made occasional forays down the James, but their role had mostly been to act as floating batteries in support of land operations. As the war dragged on into the winter of 1864-65, the ironclads would finally get their opportunity to take the fight to the enemy.

At 5:00 PM on January 23, 1865, the James River Squadron under the command of Captain John K. Mitchell began to descend the James River from Chaffin's Bluff. The *Fredericksburg* led with the gunboat *Hampton* and torpedo boat *Hornet* lashed to its side. Next was the *Virginia II* with the gunboat

2015 ANNUAL MEETING & TOUR
SATURDAY, OCTOBER 24, 10 AM
SECOND DEEP BOTTOM
(details & map inside)

In late January 1865, the Confederacy's James River Squadron finally seized an opportunity to take an active part in the defense of Richmond and, if it were successful, affect the outcome of the war in the Eastern Theatre. The result was the battle of Trent's Reach.

— John M. Coski, historian & author of
Capital Navy: The Men, Ships and Operations
of the James River Squadron

Nansemond, the tug *Torpedo* and the torpedo boat *Scorpion* secured to her sides. The ironclad *Richmond* was last with the gunboats *Drewry* and *Beaufort* and the torpedo boat *Wasp* alongside. Their mission was to slip past Federal guns at Fort Brady, cut through the obstructions at Trent's Reach, and attack the supply depot at City Point.

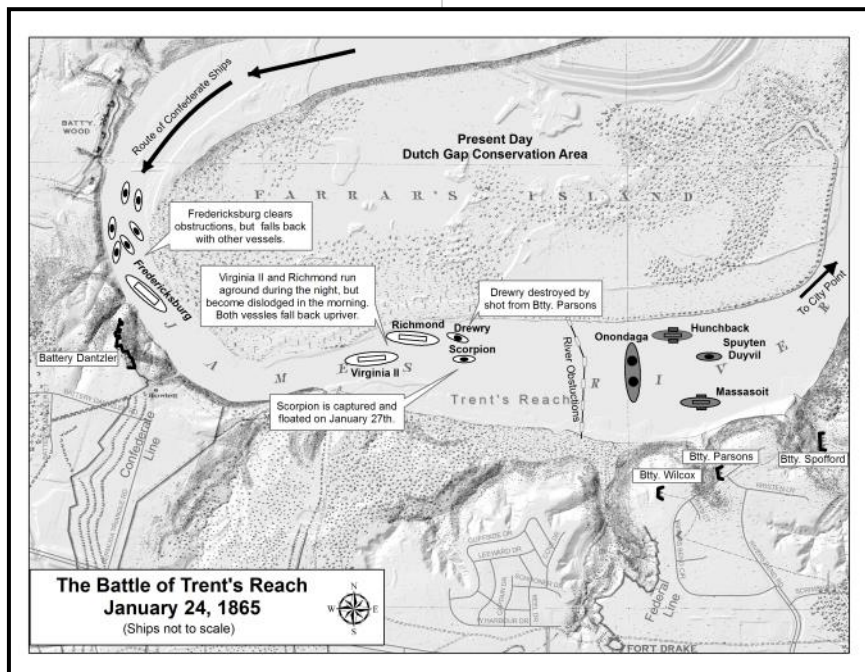
The decision to make the attack was brought on by two factors. A reliable report indicated that recent floods had washed away some of the obstructions at Trent's Reach. Also, most of the Federal ships patrolling this part of the James had been sent to North Carolina to take part in the attack on Fort Fisher. Timing was critical and the movement toward City Point would be a risky one. The James River Squadron would first have to get past the guns of the 1st Connecticut Heavy Artillery at Fort Brady. They would then need to cut through the river obstructions and get past the three batteries at Trent's Reach. Waiting somewhere downriver was the double-turreted ironclad *Onondaga*, one of the most powerful ships in the Union navy and one of the few left behind to guard the James. Navigating the twists, turns, and shallows of the James River was another challenge. Accomplishing all of this in darkness on a cold January night was a tall order.

By 8 PM the flotilla reached Fort Brady where they received 25 shots from two 100 pounder and three 30 pounder guns. "The fort was instantly opened upon by the rebel land batteries, and their fire soon disabled one of the 100 pounder guns" reported Union Colonel Henry Abbot. A design flaw in Fort Brady did not allow the guns to fire downriver as the Confederates sailed by. Soon the James River Squadron was past its first obstacle.

The Confederate flotilla reached Trent's Reach at 10:30 PM. The *Fredericksburg* and the gunboat *Hampton* went forward and cut through the obstructions while under mortar fire from Battery

Parsons and small arms from along the shore. By 1 AM the passage was clear but the *Fredericksburg* and the *Hampton* were the only vessels that ventured downriver. At the western end of Trent's Reach, the *Virginia II* and the *Richmond* had both run aground. The gunboats *Nansemond* and *Beaufort* spent three hours trying to free the *Virginia II*. During the night the *Drewry* and *Scorpion* also ran aground. The *Fredericksburg* and *Hampton* were recalled upriver to protect the other ships.

As the sun rose, the *Fredericksburg* and the smaller vessels retreated to a sheltered bend in the river opposite Battery Dantzler. The *Richmond*, *Virginia II*, *Drewry*, and *Scorpion* were still stuck in the mud. The Federal land batteries open fire, and a shot soon hit the powder magazine of the *Drewry*, causing the ship to explode. Gen. Grant is reported to have heard the explosion at his headquarters at City Point. The *Scorpion* was abandoned and fell into Federal hands.



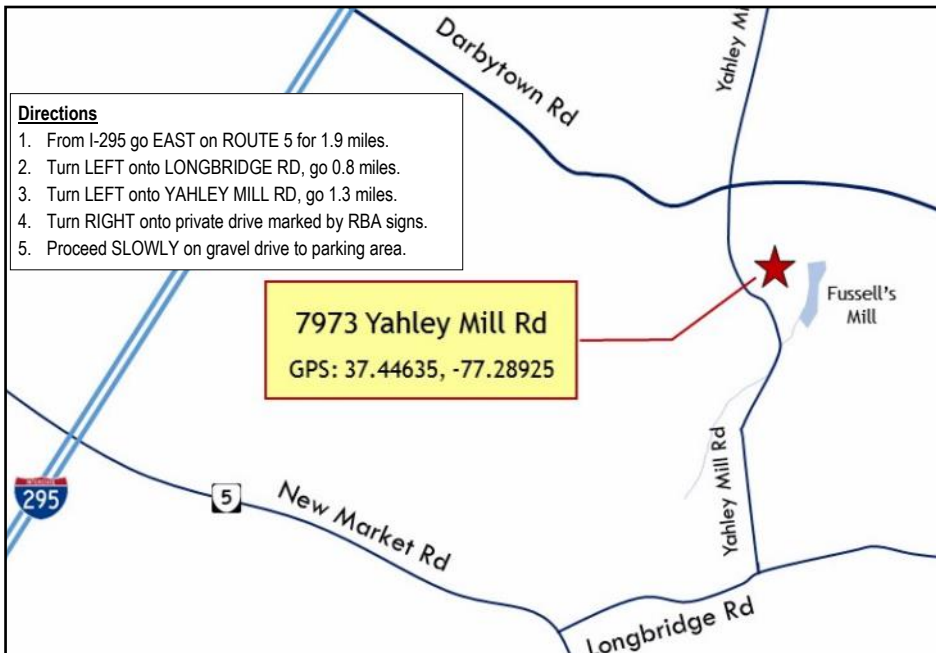
At 7:30 AM, the Federal batteries trained their fire onto the *Richmond* and *Virginia II*. While this was occurring the *USS Onondaga* was downriver near Deep Bottom. Commander William A. Parker, who was in charge of naval operations on the James, made the decision to move the previous night in order to obtain what he believed was a more advantageous

position. The following morning the ship made its way back upriver. At 10:15 the *Onondaga* joined the gunboats *Hunchback* and *Massasoit* and the torpedo boat *Spuyten Duyvil* at Trent's Reach. By this time the rising tide was lifting the *Virginia II* and *Richmond* out of the mud. From a half-mile the *Onondaga's* two 15-inch guns made several hits on the vessels but both were able to get upriver to safety.

The Confederate ships remained under the shadow of Battery Dantzler that day as another attempt to push downriver was contemplated. After assessing the damage his ships had suffered, Captain Mitchell decided to take the James River Squadron back upriver. The ships exchanged fire one more time with Fort Brady as they moved north and returned to their anchorage at Chaffin's Bluff. The attempt to break out and attack City Point was over.

While now considered a minor footnote in the war, the action at Trent's Reach caused quite a stir in the

Masthead photo on page 1:
James River naval collage



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2015 ANNUAL MEETING & TOUR - SECOND DEEP BOTTOM

It has been 6 years since we last met at Fussell's Mill. There have been a number of exciting developments since then. Through a half-dozen acquisitions, *RBA has preserved over 50 critical acres of this important 1864 battlefield* — 32 acres of the Aug. 14th site & 25 acres of the Aug. 16th site. In addition, the historic miller's house is being carefully restored. Join your fellow preservationists at Fussell's Mill again this year. Bring a chair, pack a lunch, and tour the new property you helped save along Darbytown Road. This event is free and open to the public.

TRENT'S REACH (continued)

Union command. The threat of three Confederate ironclads breaking through was very real and the urgency of the situation can be seen in a telegraph sent by General Grant to Commander Parker. In it he wrote: "You ought to have every gunboat you can get in the river up with you. Should the enemy attempt to come down the river it is your duty, in view of the large amount of stores here, to attack with all the vessels you have, using your vessels as rams as well as batteries, even at the expense of half the boats you have got."

Parker, on board the *Onondaga*, was unresponsive to Grant's dispatches. Grant's patience wore thin and Parker was relieved of command. So great was the concern over the situation at Trent's Reach that Assistant Secretary of the Navy Gustavus Fox, was summoned by President Abraham Lincoln who suggested that Admiral Farragut

RBA board member Scott Williams contributed this article. Scott is Chairman of the Military History Committee for the Chesterfield Historical Society. He conducts boat tours of the *Civil War on the James*, and was a contributing author & mapmaker for the *Bermuda Hundred Campaign Tour Guide*.

should report to City Point and personally take charge.

Aftermath

William Parker was court-martialed on March 18, 1865 under charges of deliberately disobeying orders and intentionally avoiding an encounter with the enemy. Secretary of the Navy, Gideon Wells reviewed the findings against Parker and concluded the he was generally being found guilty of "error of judgement". Wells refused to sanction the ruling of the court-martial and set aside the verdict. Nonetheless, Parker's 33 year career in the Navy was over and he was moved to the retired list.

On the Confederate side, Captain Mitchell fared no better. He was relieved of command and replaced by rear Admiral Raphael Semmes on February 18, 1864.

The three Confederate ironclads never made another attempt to break out. They met their fate when Richmond was evacuated after the fall of Petersburg. All three vessels were blown up in the James River near Drewry's bluff. What is left of them remains there to this day. ❖

Published for the RBA membership

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RICHMOND DISPATCHES

[NEWS FROM THE FRONT]. — The city was full of rumors yesterday morning, to the effect that an armistice of ninety days had been agreed upon between the Confederate and United States; and some went so far as to state that white flags were flying from the hostile lines below Richmond.There was a report yesterday morning, which found believers, that we had recaptured Fort Harrison.

...It is astonishing how difficult a matter it is to ascertain the truth of what occurs on our lines, eight miles from the city. ...we have constantly to look to the New York papers for news from Dutch Gap and its neighborhood.

- *The Richmond Dispatch*: Jan 25, 1865

Rumors abound in time of war. In reality, less than 24 hours earlier, the James River Fleet had been turned back at Trent's Reach after a desperate attempt to turn Grant's position at City Point. Though most Richmonders still held out hope that Lee's army would ultimately prevail, many were understandably frustrated by constant rumors and the lack of reliable news from the front lines just outside the capital city.

PRESERVATION NEWS! RBA recently purchased another 5-acre tract at **Second Deep Bottom**. This property closes a gap between Darbytown Rd and 3 existing RBA properties, providing an *unbroken tract of 25 acres*. On Aug. 16, 1864, these fields were the scene of intense fighting as bold Union frontal assaults were met by desperate Confederate counterattacks under the watchful eye of Gen. R.E. Lee. Nightfall ended the struggle.

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