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# GUIDE TO VIRGINIA'S CIVIL WAR

BATTLEFIELDS & SITES

150 YEARS AGO

## FIASCO on the POTOMAC The Battle of Ball's Bluff

By James A. Morgan, III

**B**attered and disorganized, the Union and Confederate armies kept their distance from each other in the weeks following the July 21, 1861, Battle of First Manassas.

The Union army used the Potomac River as a kind of defensive moat while the Confederates established a line behind Bull Run and the Occoquan River. Some 25-30 miles separated the main bodies of the armies although the Confederates maintained small forces close to the Union lines to observe their activities and movements.

One of these detachments, 2,800 men commanded by Confederate Col. Nathan "Shanks" Evans, was posted at Leesburg, watching the Potomac crossing points for several miles upriver and downriver from the town. The considerably larger Union force on the other side had the same relatively passive assignment.

In October, however, Evans



"Death of Col. Baker" on the Ball's Bluff Battlefield

became concerned about a possible Federal attempt to envelope his small force. Gen. Charles P. Stone's Federals on the other side of the river were greatly reinforced early that month and soon numbered some 12,000 men. Another 12,000 Union soldiers were camped in nearby

Langley around the same time, putting 24,000 enemy troops within fairly easy striking distance of Evans's small Southern command at Leesburg.

When skirmishing broke out upriver at Harpers Ferry Oct. 15-16, Evans seems to have believed that the envelopment he

feared was about to begin. As a result, he abandoned Leesburg on Oct. 17. Hearing of this retreat, Gen. George McClellan, now in command of all Union forces, ordered Gen. George McCall's division, then at Langley, to probe westward toward Leesburg.

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### Ball's Bluff 150th anniversary events

**A** reenactment on the historic battlefield highlights a weekend commemoration of the Battle of Ball's Bluff Oct. 22-23. Other activities include a living history camp at nearby Morven Park and a visit by the HistoryMobile traveling exhibit.

The Ball's Bluff reenactment is set for 2 pm Saturday at the Ball's Bluff Battlefield Regional Park, just off Route 15 near Leesburg. Visitors are advised to arrive early at Morven Park to take in the living history camps and grab a ride to

the reenactment via shuttle busses. General admission tickets are \$5 and are available online only. Organizers have limited attendance to 3,000 spectators.

Sunday's activities include more living history at Morven Park and

a reenactment of the Battle of Dranesville.

For ticket sales, the complete schedule, directions, a history and much more, see [www.150thballsbluff.com](http://www.150thballsbluff.com).

Map of Virginia, pages 20-21

## Fiasco on the Potomac, cont'd from page 1

By the time McCall began moving, however, Evans, chastised by Gen. P.G.T. Beauregard for retreating, returned to Leesburg. This situation confused McClellan who decided against any further action and ordered McCall back to Langley. The 12,000 Union troops left the area on the morning of Oct. 21.

McClellan had informed Stone (across the Potomac River from Leesburg) about McCall's mission and suggested that Stone conduct a "slight demonstration" to gauge the Confederate reaction. Significantly, he did not tell Stone that McCall was ordered to withdraw.

Stone, on Oct. 20, wanted to give the appearance that he was about to cross the river in force so he moved troops very visibly to Edwards Ferry, 2 miles downriver from Leesburg. Evans knew a feint when he saw one, however, and did not react. By evening, Stone's demonstration was over and McCall was preparing to move his division back to Langley.

The story might well have ended there had Stone not ordered a reconnaissance patrol to cross the Potomac at Ball's Bluff, high ground on the Leesburg side of the river, to determine the effects of all the troop movements.

Around dark Oct. 20, Capt. Chase Philbrick and 20 men from the 15th Massachusetts quietly rowed from Harrison's Island to Ball's Bluff, then advanced into the open fields occupied by the present-day Potomac Crossing subdivision. In the dark, Philbrick mistook a row of trees for the tents of a Confederate camp and reported this incorrect information to Stone. Based on this dubious report, Stone ordered a raid on the "camp," which, in turn, led to the Battle of Ball's Bluff.

Col. Charles Devens with 300 men of his 15th Massachusetts immediately began shuttling his troops across the river in small boats, ready to attack the "camp" at dawn. As a diversion, Stone crossed a small cavalry force at Edwards Ferry to divert Confederate attention away from the raiding party at Ball's Bluff. This two-pronged crossing has been interpreted mistakenly by many historians as an attempted encirclement of the town. But the Union troops had limited missions. Leesburg was not their target.

Just after dawn Oct. 21 Devens discovered the mistake about the trees and immediately sent a messenger to Stone for further instructions. Before the messenger could return, however, Devens engaged some pickets from Company K, 17th Mississippi, and the unplanned, unintended battle began. Ironically, this opening clash occurred as the messenger was telling Stone that all was quiet.

With this additional faulty information, Stone decided to turn the raid into an expanded reconnaissance. He reinforced Devens with the remainder of the 15th Massachusetts, another 300–350 men, then ordered him to move cautiously toward Leesburg. He instructed Col. (and U.S. Senator) Edward Baker to go to Ball's Bluff and evaluate the situation. Stone has been criticized severely by historians for giving the inexperienced Baker a combat command but, at the time,



The Ball's Bluff battlefield today

neither Stone nor Baker knew that fighting had broken out. Stone gave Baker command of what both men believed to be a reconnaissance mission.

On his way upriver, Baker learned of the fighting and began ordering more troops across. As no one had planned a major river crossing, there were few available boats and the crossing point quickly became a bottleneck as the Federal troops crossed very slowly from Maryland to Harrison's Island, then from the island to Ball's Bluff. Only 1,700 of the approximately 7,000 Federals in that area made it across the river to participate in the battle. They faced almost exactly the same number of Confederates.

Two companies of Baker's "California Regiment" engaged portions of the 8th Virginia mid-afternoon. The 18th Mississippi next advanced but was hit hard and withdrew. Fighting continued on the flanks for about two more hours. Col. Baker was killed around 4:30 pm (the only U.S. Senator ever killed in battle). Command then passed to Col. Milton Cogswell of the 42nd New York. Fresh Confederate troops, the bulk of the 17th Mississippi, arrived an hour or so later to form the

core of the climactic advance against the worn out Union troops whose line finally broke shortly before dusk.

The Federals fled in panic down the steep slopes behind today's national cemetery and tumbled into the river. During this overwhelming defeat, the Union force suffered 223 killed, 226 wounded, and 553 prisoners. The

Confederates suffered 36 killed, 264 wounded, and three prisoners.

The result of the battle is somewhat curious. Tactically, there was barely any result at all except for the loss of life. The Federals still controlled their side of the river and the Confederates still controlled theirs. The situation on Oct. 22 was much as it had been on Oct. 20.

But there were significant political repercussions. The desire to determine the cause of the Ball's Bluff defeat (as well as of the defeats at Wilson's Creek in August and at Bull Run in July) resulted in Congress creating the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War. This committee, composed of four senators and three representatives, quickly became an ongoing thorn in President Abraham Lincoln's side as he tried to perform his duties as commander-in-chief. The committee's first order of business was to investigate Ball's Bluff, but this investigation was less about the battle and more about a political attack on Stone. Because he was not a staunch abolitionist as the committee members were, Stone quickly became a target for the committee's highly politicized agenda.

Ball's Bluff is as serene today as it was horrific 150 years ago. As the Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority prepares to commemorate the event with a reenactment on the battlefield, visitors can enjoy the fruits of these preparations by exploring the field on several named interpretive trails (three named for Union participants, three for Confederates) and reading about the battle on more than 20 recently installed historical markers and maps, which have replaced older, often incorrect signage. Today's field, once badly overgrown, is being cleared and restored to its 1861 appearance. Free guided tours are led by trained volunteers every Saturday and Sunday between April and October at 11 am and 1 pm.

For further information on the battlefield, go to [www.nvrpa.org/park/ball\\_s\\_bluff](http://www.nvrpa.org/park/ball_s_bluff).

James Morgan's book *A Little Short of Boats: The Civil War Battles of Ball's Bluff and Edward's Ferry, Oct. 21–22, 1861* is available through Amazon.com.

### GUIDE TO VIRGINIA'S CIVIL WAR BATTLEFIELDS & SITES

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#### PAGE ONE HISTORY PUBLICATIONS

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