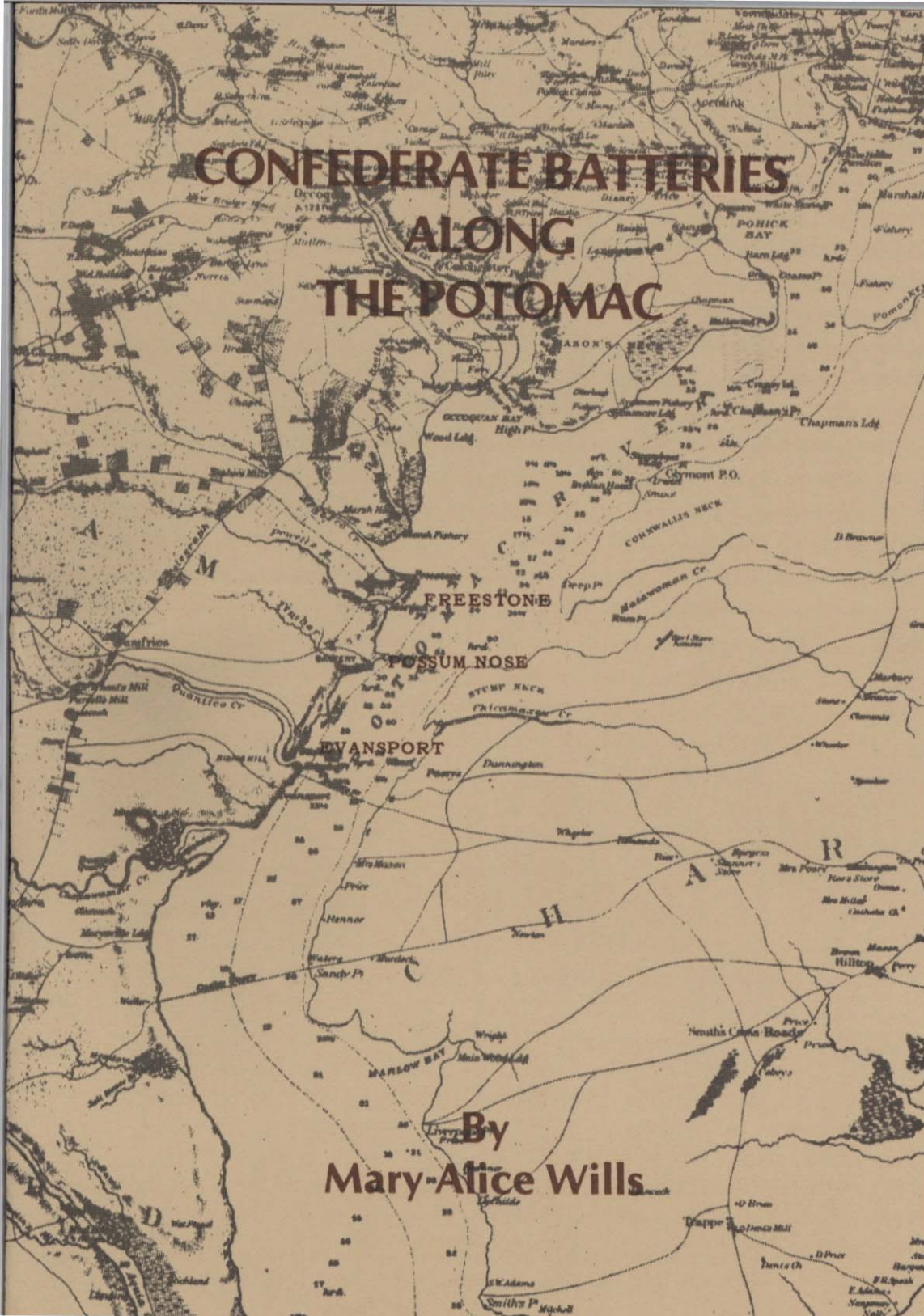


# CONFEDERATE BATTERIES ALONG THE POTOMAC



By  
Mary-Alice Wills

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**Commissioned by the  
Prince William County  
Historical Commission**

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## PRINCE WILLIAM FORTIFIES . . .

## . . . THE RIVER IS CLOSED

Most Americans know that Washington, D.C., was partially burned by the British during the War of 1812, but few know that it was blockaded by the Confederacy during the Civil War despite the fact that a U.S. Naval Flotilla patrolled the Potomac and over forty forts were built for its defense. It was so embarrassing to the Federal Government that it received scanty publicity and has remained a relatively unknown aspect of the Civil War.

After the fall of Fort Sumter and President Lincoln's call for troops, Washington, D.C., became the focal point of the North's war preparations. Its principal route of supply and communication was the Potomac River - Washington was a port city. Its docks were very busy. Ships of every description made their way up the Potomac loaded to capacity with government orders.

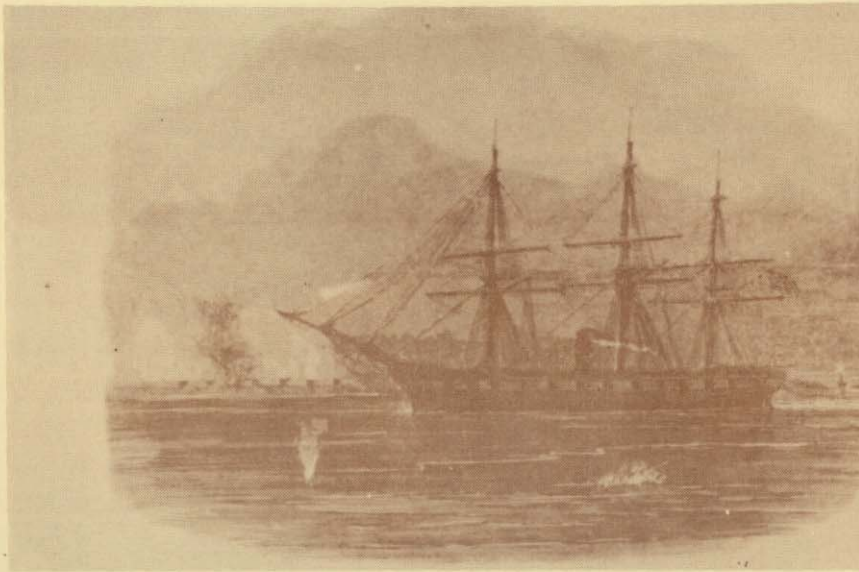


Both banks of the Potomac River were controlled by pro-Southern forces. Maintaining uninterrupted navigation was critical to the Federal Government since its only other link with the North was a single-track branch line of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad, which was deemed inadequate for the supply of Washington.

Within two weeks of the fall of Fort Sumter rumors were heard that batteries were being constructed on the Virginia bank of the Potomac and that a blockade was imminent. The U.S. Navy created the Potomac Flotilla. It was charged with keeping the river open to Union shipping and restricting communication between the Virginians and the Confederate sympathizers in southern Maryland.



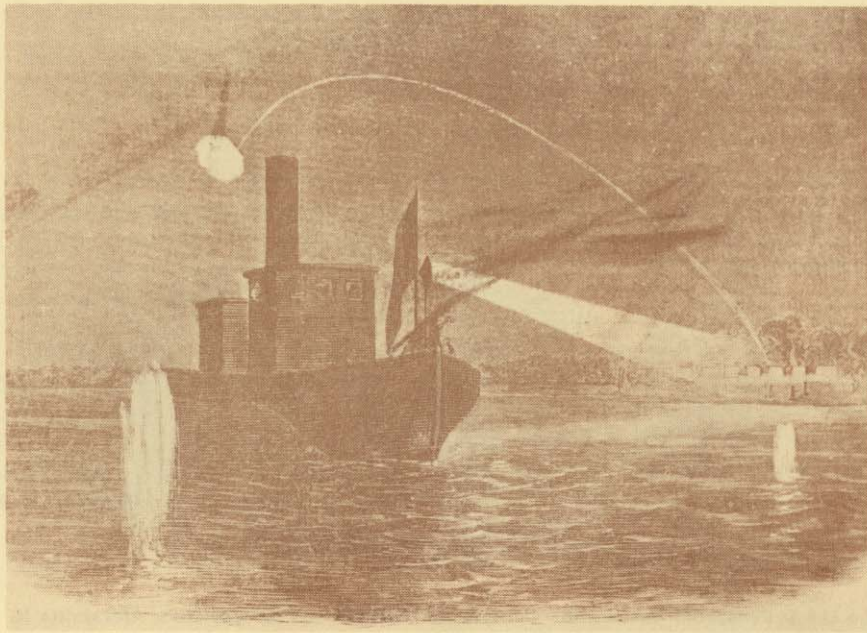
Schooners running the Evansport and Shipping Point batteries. [Illustrated London News, Dec. 7, 1861]



The U.S.S. Pensacola running the Confederate batteries on its way from Alexandria to New Orleans. [Harper's Weekly, Feb. 1, 1862]

The Virginians, even before Virginia was officially a member of the Confederate States of America, realized the opportunity they had to strangle Washington by erecting land batteries on prominent points along the Potomac. After dismissing Mathias Point in King George County as a battery site because of its distance from main Confederate encampments, they built a battery at Aquia Creek Landing in Stafford County. Its principal purpose was to protect the railroad landing and its guns were incapable of reaching the main channel of the river. Another more effective site had to be found.

After much study General Robert E. Lee reached a decision. On August 22, 1861, he ordered the erection of a battery at Evansport which

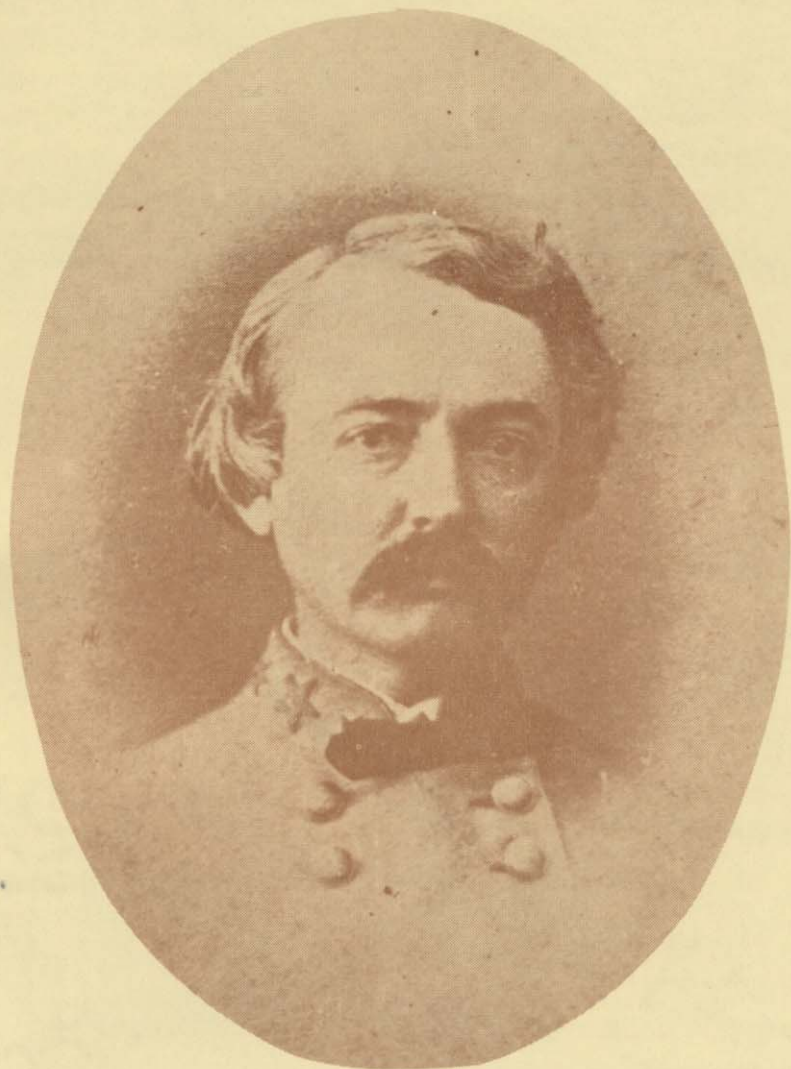


Use of a calcium light by a ship of the Potomac Flotilla to view the Evansport battery at night. [Leslie's Illustrated Weekly]

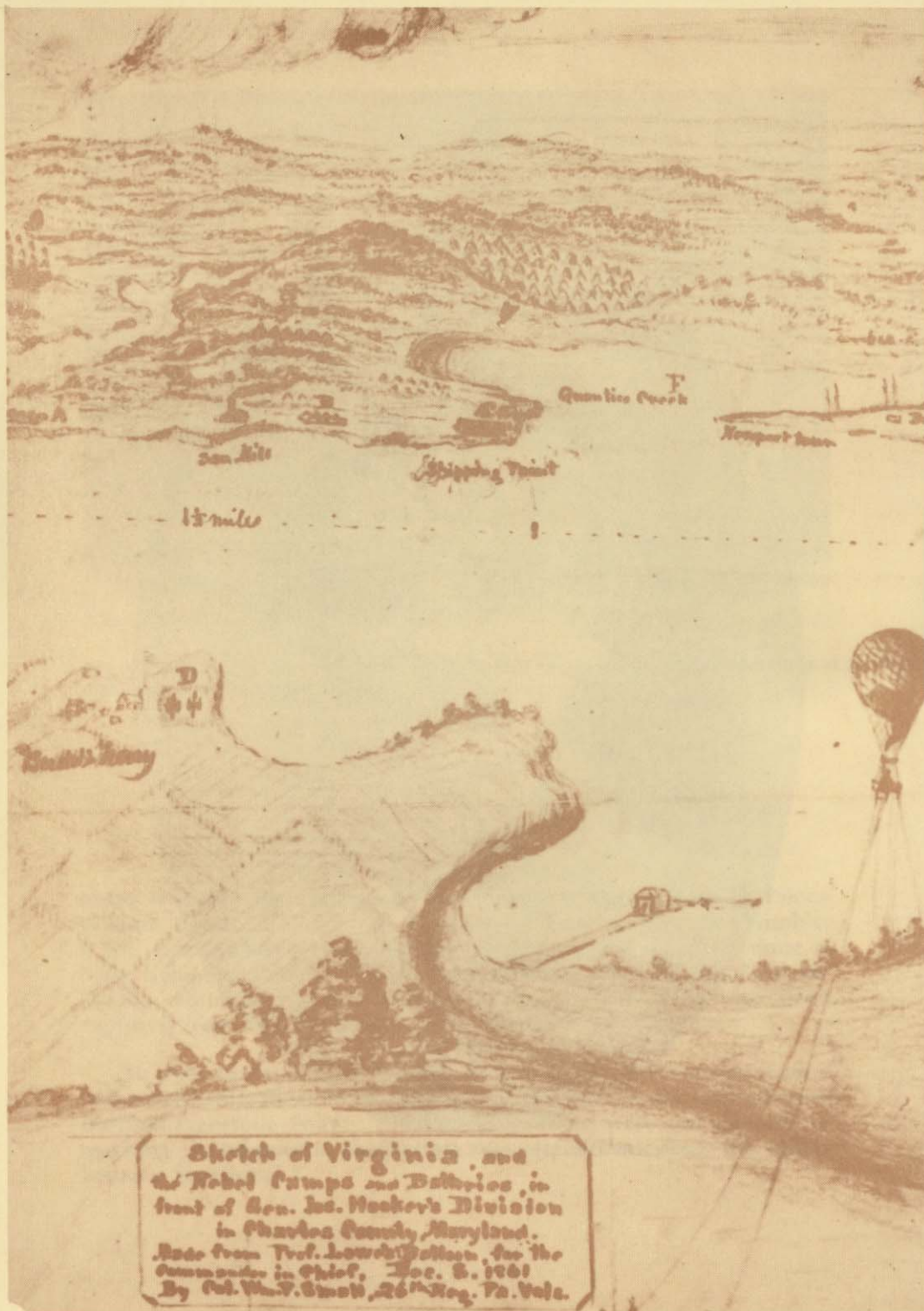
today is within the confines of the Quantico Marine Base in Prince William County. Under the direction of General Isaac R. Trimble, C.S.A., not one but several batteries were built. The work was done at night behind a shield of trees under the very noses of the Potomac Flotilla. About twenty guns were put in place. Some of them had been captured from the Yankees at the First Battle of Manassas.

In order to distract the Potomac Flotilla from the Evansport section of the river while the batteries were being constructed, the Confederates fortified Freestone Point. The four guns there were not capable of reaching the channel. The battery was abandoned when the others became functional.





General W.H.C. Whiting, C.S.A. [Library of Congress]



Map drawn December 8, 1861, from the balloon Constitution, showing Confederate





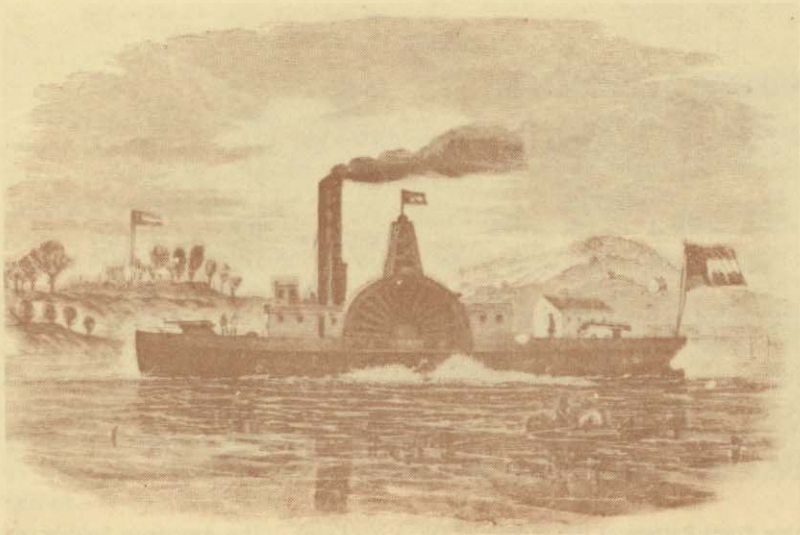
eries, camps, and terrain in Virginia from Chopawamsic Creek to Freestone Point. [National Archives]

Union naval officers, suspecting that a battery might exist at Evansport, fired on the point on October 15, 1861. The trees concealing the guns were felled and the batteries returned the fire. Other batteries were soon revealed on Shipping Point, which is located at the mouth of Quantico Creek, on Possum Nose [referred to as Cockpit Point] a short distance up river from Shipping Point, and down river from Evansport to the mouth of Chopawamsic Creek.

By January, 1862, there were approximately thirty-seven heavy guns and an unknown number of smaller ones along the river. The batteries were a cooperative effort of the Confederate army and navy. Brigadier General W.H.C. Whiting's Brigade, which was camped in and around Dumfries, helped man the batteries and guard the Potomac and Occoquan Rivers against a Union attack.



Battery on Possum Nose [Cockpit Point]. [Official and Illustrated War Record]



Confederate Steamer, George Page. [Harper's Weekly]

The batteries along the Potomac in Prince William County effectively closed the Potomac River which was so vital to the supply of Washington. All ships carrying U.S. government orders were directed to go to Baltimore to unload. Those ships not carrying government stores which attempted to run the batteries were subjected to a hail of fire for a distance of about six miles. The speediest ship could be kept under constant fire for almost an hour. The Confederate forces also made use of an armed steamer, George Page, which they tied up either in Quantico or Chopawamsic Creek.

The Union made no attempt to dislodge the Confederate forces from their positions along the river. General Joseph Hooker's Division of eight thousand men was sent to southern Maryland to occupy the area opposite the batteries and prevent troops of General Whiting's Brigade from crossing the river. Two Union batteries were constructed and a U.S. Aeronautic Corps observation balloon was stationed opposite Evansport.





Shipping Point Battery at the mouth of Quantico Creek. [The American Soldier in the Civil War, p. 58]

Every resident of Washington immediately felt the effect of the blockade through a general increase in commodity prices and the lack of unessential provisions. A food and fuel crisis was avoided only because of the existence of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad's single-track branch line into the city which was expanded beyond what was believed possible by the best of railroad men. Although it enabled the immediate needs of the city's residents and the army to be met, the price of scarce items, such as fuel, was astronomical.

The blockade was so humiliating to the Northern cause that President Lincoln, Senators and Representatives exerted great influence upon General George B. McClellan, General-in-Chief of the Union Army, to destroy the batteries. McClellan's inaction caused President Lincoln to include the following directive in his War Order of March 8, 1862.

Ordered, That the Army and the Navy co-operate in an immediate effort to capture the enemy's batteries upon the Potomac between Washington and the Chesapeake Bay.

Before details for breaking the blockade could be worked out, word reached Washington that the batteries along the Potomac in Prince William County had been abandoned. Unusual activity in General Hooker's Division had been reported by General Whiting's Brigade to General Joseph E. Johnston, C.S.A., Commander of the Army of Northern Virginia. He was expecting General McClellan to take the field and move against Richmond. The activity in Hooker's Division was interpreted to mean that McClellan was about to attack Richmond via a route that would take him down the Potomac on the Maryland side of the river to Potomac Creek, across the river and on through Fredericksburg. Johnston withdrew to what he considered to be a good defensive position along the Rappahannock River and abandoned not only the batteries but also the other Confederate positions in Northern Virginia.



Union battery in southern Maryland opposite Confederate batteries. [Illustrated London News, Dec. 7, 1861]

The blockade, which had cut Washington off from the sea for almost five months ended on March 9, 1862. The Confederates destroyed some of the guns before withdrawing. Others were hauled aboard U.S. naval vessels and appropriated to the Union army and navy. Some of the guns, which were too far inland to be moved to the river bank, were rendered unusable by Union forces. Some of these guns have been mounted for display by the Marine Corps and can be seen in the Quantico Marine Base.

The significance of the Confederate blockade of the Potomac River lies in the fact that it was not just a Northern city that was effected but the capital of the Union. It was a humiliating disgrace, a diplomatic embarrassment and caused the population of Washington, D.C., great inconvenience.



The Seminole and Pocahontas engaging the Evansport batteries on October 15, 1861.  
[Note: Picture is printed in reverse. The ships were going down the Potomac River.]  
[Harper's Weekly, Nov. 2, 1861]



COVER: Map of Northeastern Virginia in vicinity of Washington. Compiled in the  
Topographic Engineers Office, Arlington, Va., Jan. 1, 1862.