

Kelly's Ford

March 17, 1863

Fauquier County in the Civil War

From 1861-1865, Fauquier County's "hallowed grounds" were the site of twelve battles and countless troop movements, raids, skirmishes, and encampments. With its proximity to Washington, DC, the county was key territory in Union and Confederate strategy.

In 1862 and 1863, General Robert E. Lee used Fauquier County to his advantage. The engagements at

Rappahannock Station I and Thoroughfare Gap were indispensable to his victory at Second Manassas in August 1862, while the cavalry battles at Brandy Station, Aldie, Middleburg, and Upperville shielded Lee's infantry as he commenced his second invasion of the North during the spring of 1863.

After a fateful engagement in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, Fauquier County's role in the war changed. No longer the cradle of Confederate invasion, the battle lands of Manassas Gap, Auburn, Buckland Mills, and Rappahannock Station II were Lee's path of retreat.

Yet, much as Gettysburg did not end the war, Lee's retreat was not the last that Fauquier County saw of Civil War soldiers. Throughout the Civil War, the "hallowed grounds" of Fauquier County were contested fields of battle. ■



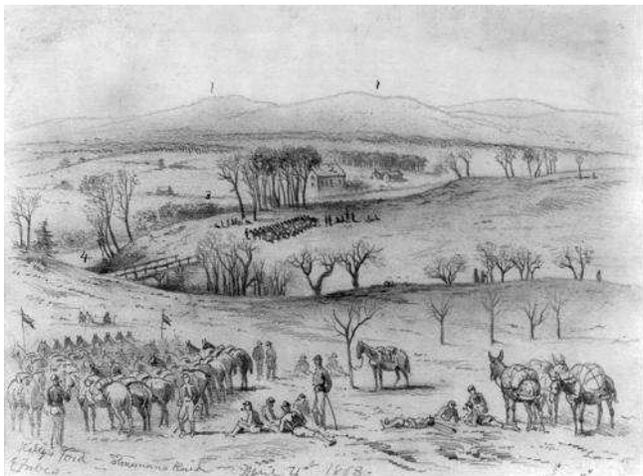
*Warrenton Courthouse, 1862.
Photo by Timothy O'Sullivan. New York Historical Society Collection.*



Rappahannock River from Bus. Rt. 15/29 bridge. Stone pier from CW era bridge at middle right. Photo by Ray B. Root

Winter Along the Rappahannock

Following the battle of Fredericksburg in December 1862, Union and Confederate armies settled into winter encampments along the Rappahannock River. General Robert E. Lee's Confederate



Kelly's Ford was an important crossing point on the Rappahannock River, especially for cavalymen looking to raid the enemy. Following the March 17, 1863, raid by General William Averell, Federals under General George Stoneman crossed Kelly's Ford again in April to raid their Confederate foes. Pictured above is General Stoneman's April raid, sketched by wartime artist Edwin Forbes. Library of Congress collection.

infantry encamped near Fredericksburg on the south side of the river. General Ambrose Burnside's Federals pitched their tents on the north side of the river in Stafford County.

Throughout the winter, Union and Confederate cavalry repeatedly crossed the Rappahannock and raided their enemies on the opposite bank. The largest of these raids occurred on March 17, 1863, and resulted in a pitched battle at nearby Kelly's Ford, on the Fauquier-Culpeper County border. Kelly's Ford was the first substantial purely cavalry fight in the eastern theatre of war. ■

Kelly's Ford March 17, 1863

Ordered to attack General Fitzhugh Lee's Confederate cavalry near Culpeper, General William Averell and his Federal horsemen crossed the Rappahannock River at Kelly's Ford on the morning of March 17. After driving back Lee's skirmishers, Averell took up a defensive position in the woods near the ford, and awaited Lee's horsemen.

Result:
Inconclusive

Troops Engaged:
~2,100 US
~800 CS

Casualties:
~78 US
~133 CS

When the Confederates charged, they rode across the Wheatley farm towards a stone wall, in an attempt to turn the Union right flank, but fierce fire forced them to veer left, exposing their flank. It was during this charge that the "Gallant" Major John Pelham fell, mortally wounded. On the Union right, Lee's men attacked but withdrew when Federal regiments moved to strike their own flanks.

Lee withdrew the entire Confederate line, and made one final charge. "It was like the coming together of two mighty railroad trains at full speed. The yelling of men, the clashing of sabers, a few empty saddles, a few wounded and dying, and the charge was over," wrote one soldier. As Federal artillery fire began to cut gaps into the Rebel line, they retreated. Averell didn't press his advantage, however. Fearing he would soon face Confederate reinforcements, Averell withdrew his men back across the Rappahannock.

The battle ended in a draw, marking the first time Confederate cavalymen had not defeated their Union opponents. ■

