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ll things considered, life was good at Black Walnut plantation as Christmas 1862 drew near. Benjamin Garrett, who operated Kenmore Plantation, a Black Walnut tract inherited through marriage, wrote to his brother in Williamsburg with the latest dispatches from Southside: The family was in good health, crop prices were high, and “we tobacco planters are the most blessed & prosperous people in the Confederacy. We have never obtained such prices for tobacco & never had as much money.”

Yet a sense of foreboding seeped into what should have been the most festive of seasons at the Clover family homeplace: “My opinion is that times will be worse after the 1st of January if Lincoln attempts to carry out his Emancipation Proclamation,” Garrett confided in the Dec. 3 letter to his brother, before he recovered his high spirits: “We don’t feel any uneasiness up here & have an abiding confidence that we shall be successful. I never saw greater confidence than is manifested by the people in Richmond. There seems to be no fear that the city will ever be conquered & negroes are selling higher than I ever knew them.

“Our success is certain but you, who are in the power of the enemy, may suffer greatly,” the letter warned.

Williamsburg had fallen under federal control in May 1862, abandoned by Confederate forces in a tactical retreat that paradoxically exposed Union General George McClellan’s reluctance to seize the initiative of battle and wage total war on the South. The Peninsula campaign deprived Virginia of its coastal flank, but soon enough, Confederate forces roaming the state would be ascendant.

The latter half of 1862 witnessed some of the most brilliant generalmanship of the war: Jackson bedeviling federal forces up and down the Shenandoah Valley, Lee fending off McClellan’s assault on Richmond and achieving a smashing victory at the Second Battle of Manassas. Morale was soaring throughout the Confederacy.

Far removed from the action as the year drew to an end, Benjamin Garrett wrote his brother that he would be traveling to Richmond “in some 2 or 3 weeks” and would invest in Confederate war bonds while there. He extended a warm invitation: “If you should decide to leave home bring yr family to my home — telegraph me from Richmond & I will meet you in Clover. Meal & flour enough to support us for the year & will willingly divide with you Mary, Bettie & my 2 cute boys are well & send love to all their cousins.”

It is unknown if Garrett’s brother took him up on the offer, although other members of the extended family would later find their way to Black Walnut as the fighting dragged on. Garrett was the son-in-law of the estate’s late owner, John Sims; he and his wife, Maria Sims Garrett, had received Kenmore Plantation after John Sims’ death in 1852. Maria’s brother, William Howson Sims, inherited the bulk of the Black Walnut property.

Spanning 2,500 acres, the Sims farm was one of the large estates to be found in the richest and most powerful state of the Confederacy; in Halifax County, it was rivaled in size and wealth only by the holdings of a select list of families, with names like Carrington, Logan, Coleman, Edmunds, and Bruce.

Across the Staunton River in Charlotte County, a similarly impressive plantation also bore the Bruce name.

From such families hailed the men who controlled local public office, whose words carried the most weight in the overarching debates of the day. In the run-up to war, there had been no more important question than Virginia’s response to secession and, perhaps more uncomfortably, its stance on slavery. Fully half of Halifax County’s farmers and homesteaders claimed enslaved African-Americans as property, according to the 1860 federal census, yet the majority of them, 584, owned fewer than 10 slaves each. One-tenth that number owned 50 or more slaves. A mere eight owned as many as 100 or more slaves.

The Sims family was among these large slaveholders. With their enormous wealth came ease and security, as well as a conferred privilege of special value during wartime: The right to purchase substitutes — typically poor whites — for conscripted service in the military.

In this way, the men of the Sims farm were safely ensconced behind the lines when Benjamin Garrett extended the December 1862 invitation to his brother and family to come stay for a spell.

Safe, that is, until the war itself crossed onto the Sims plantation some 19 months later.



The fighting was dubbed the Battle of Staunton River Bridge, after the intended target of a Union assault. The bridge in Clover supported the Danville & Richmond Railroad, laid nearly a decade prior to the June 25, 1864, flare-up of violence. The railroad had contributed massively to the explosion of planter wealth in Southside as tobacco suddenly became much easier to transport to market.

The battle took on the name of a structure, and in legend it often goes by “The Battle of Old Men and Young Boys” — it’s not the only Civil War skirmish in Virginia to bear this nickname, as it turns out — but the setting was plantation land on the banks of the Staunton River, where Southside’s inherited wealth had congealed. By time war finally visited the region, the romance that had animated the War Between the States in the early days was long gone, undone by death and destruction that mounted as the Confederacy’s plight became increasingly desperate. The mood in the Piedmont was no longer gay, the plantings no longer so prosperous, by the time Union and Confederate forces mixed it up by the banks of the Staunton.

The story of the battle as it transpired 150 years ago this week is rooted in ambitious designs and high stakes: By June 1864, Robert E. Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia was trapped at Petersburg, and Union General Ulysses S. Grant was determined to flush his opponent out. A fervent (some say brutal) practitioner of total war, Grant aimed to snip the threads that

held the Confederacy precariously aloft: the four railroad lines that ran to Petersburg and Richmond and kept Lee's army from starvation. Two of the lines originated in southern and south-central Virginia: the Danville & Richmond and the Southside railroads.

As part of a coordinated siege of Petersburg, Grant ordered cavalry raids to penetrate Virginia's interior, destroy rail lines and property, and burn the two key railroad bridges: one spanning the Staunton River in Halifax and Charlotte counties, the other over the Appomattox River in Farmville.

The Wilson-Kautz raid, as it became known (after the commanding officers of the 5,500-strong cavalry force, Brigadier Generals James H. Wilson and Augustus Kautz), is well-documented — and in the view of many professional historians, of little consequence. It was hardly the knockout blow that Grant had sought: In fact, of all the assaults the Union attempted against supply lines leading into the Capital, it was the least successful. (Several months after the Wilson-Kautz raid failed, Union forces captured the Weldon railroad that linked Petersburg to the blockade port in Wilmington, N.C.; another cavalry offensive that Grant ordered, to sever Richmond from the Shenandoah Valley, took longer to execute, albeit with eventual staggering success.) From a Confederate perspective, the courage of the defense notwithstanding, the raid's significance was quickly overtaken by a woeful series of events: The rout of Atlanta and Sherman's March, the re-election of Abraham Lincoln, Richmond's fall, the flight to Danville by Jefferson Davis and his cabinet, Lee's surrender in Appomattox — all in less than a year.

The Battle of Staunton River Bridge marked the westernmost incursion by Wilson and Kautz and was, in fact, the only massed battle to arise out of the raid. But that's not why it is remembered, nor why it should be remembered: On this point, the amateur historians and dabblers in the minutiae of war have got the tale down cold. It's a battle of memorable valor, of aging farmers and young men streaming in from the countryside of Halifax, Mecklenburg, Charlotte and points beyond to repel an invading force at the possible cost of their lives. The response from the surrounding population was just strong enough to hold the bridge, allowing Lee to hold his position for a while longer; to simply write off the battle as an insignificant happening in the grand scheme of things is to single it out for a status that could easily apply to larger battles as well.

A month earlier, on May 15, a skirmish at New Market had set spirits on fire throughout the Confederacy: Rebel fighters under the command of former U.S. Vice President John Breckinridge repelled a larger Union cavalry force led by General Franz Siegel. But Breckinridge's command is not why New Market was notable. "This small battle was marked on one side by Siegel's skill at retreating," writes Civil War historian James McPherson in his Pulitzer Prize-winning book, "Battle Cry of Freedom," "and on the other by a spirited charge of 247 V.M.I. cadets aged fifteen to seventeen, who were ever after immortalized in southern legend."

Aside from becoming an essential part of Virginia Military Institute lore, the bravery of the cadets at New Market bolstered the Southern will to fight — perhaps no more so than in Halifax County, where on June 23, the boys academy at Halifax Courthouse eagerly answered the call to rush to the defense of Staunton River bridge.



Warfare can be rendered in pencil: through the delineation of tactics, strategies, pivot points, major victories, crushing defeats. War also can be painted with brush strokes: better to capture the emotion and struggles, the sense of what the experience must have felt like at the time. The painterly approach better suits the Battle of Staunton River Bridge, in no small part because the minutiae of the conflict can be, well, minute.

Take the number of casualties, for instance: for the Confederates, 10 dead, 24 wounded; estimates of Union casualties come in somewhere around 240 to 300 men, depending on who's doing the counting. Soldiers fell at the hand of the enemy; some were wounded by friendly fire; others entered the fray while recovering from wounds suffered in earlier fighting. (The Confederate Army colonel often credited with straightening out the flawed defense plan for the Staunton River bridge, Henry E. Coleman of the 12th North Carolina Infantry, was on wounded furlough and visiting relatives in Halifax.) The small size of the clash did little to diminish the scope of its telling; the late Halifax historian, W. Carroll Headspeth, in his 1976 booklet "The Battle of Staunton River Bridge," observed that the story of the battle has been "[t]old and retold through the years, passed down from father to son" and "has become an almost legendary story in the annals of Halifax County" and Southside Virginia.

"Old gentlemen of 70 winters took their turn in the trenches with lads of 15," the preface to Headspeth's book intones. Together with infantry reservists and 150 men from the 1st Palmetto (S.C.) Sharpshooters, who were rushed in by rail from Danville, local home guards and volunteer irregulars took their positions on the Charlotte County side of the river, down the hill where Union artillery and dismounted cavalymen had massed. Their only protection was a hastily-dug row of trenches on both sides of the railroad bridge that had been targeted.

The Union artillery barrage started around 3:45 on the afternoon of June 25; at 6 o'clock, bluecoats stormed across a vast expanse of Staunton River floodplain and attempted to overrun the defenders' position. That first charge was thrown back by the none-too-callow youths and local defenders, the two brigades of Yankee fighters regrouped to charge the bridge and torch it; four times their assault was repulsed.

Accounts of the battle offer conflicting estimates of the number of fighters involved: It is known that only about half of the 5,500-man Wilson-Kautz raiding party that set out from Petersburg on June 22 was engaged in battle at the bridge three days later. (Other fighters were kept in reserve or dispatched to check the pursuit of Confederate cavalymen under the command of Major General W.H.F. "Rooney" Lee, son of Robert E. Lee.) On the Confederate side, manpower estimates range from 938 to 1,200. It is generally agreed that some 300 fighters took their positions in the trenches; others kept to the Halifax County side of the river, where sparse Confederate artillery had been stationed.

For good reason, the defense from the trenches was celebrated in Southside Virginia society almost as soon as the firing ended: The battle had been won even if the war would soon be lost, and its common folk had proved their valor on par with the celebrated cadets of V.M.I. Remembrances of the fighting became only more flowery with the passage of time. In 1909, the same year a battlefield reunion brought together surviving veterans from both sides, William B. Hurt wrote an account that was published by the Southern Historical Society. The invocation of a certain number will be familiar to anyone who watched the hit movie action epic of the same name a few years back:

“The [Union] infantry or dismounted cavalry, outnumbering them ten to one and armed with the best and finest arms of the day, were within thirty feet of the mouth of the bridge” — other accounts suggest it was more like 70 feet — “from which they were to emerge, pouring forth a volley of rifle balls sufficient to stagger and demoralize the battle scarred veterans of Stonewall Jackson” Hurt wrote. He continued: “[A]nd yet these little untrained boys and gray headed farmers, at the command of their commander, arose from their position of partial safety and protection and with a firm and steady step, marched into the very jaws of death itself to succor the brave Coleman [leader of the entrenched fighters] who was standing like Leonidas at Thermopylae, with his faithful little band of three hundred, to keep back the invaders.”

(Captain Hurt, the commander of a Home Guard contingent of old men and young boys at Halifax Courthouse, likely did not personally witness the events being described. Carroll Headspeth, in his booklet on the battle, noted that Hurt was felled as he was leading his men north over the bridge into Charlotte County. He was lucky: a bullet struck his belt buckle, grazed his side and caused him to fall down a riverbank. “He did not fight in the battle at all,” observed the local historian. At the 45th anniversary celebration in 1909, the old former captain showed up “wearing the same belt he wore on the first crossing, the buckle bearing the mark of an enemy bullet, mute evidence of the battle,” Headspeth wrote.)



As with paintings, time has a way of altering the hues of battle — and layering it in a shroud of gauze. Time, however, also has a way of revealing subtleties and information that heretofore may have been lost to memory. As the region prepares to celebrate its sole Civil War engagement, descendants of the men who fought there are coming forward with accounts that have been little told — adding to the record of the battle as compiled by the Historic Staunton River Foundation, sponsors of the weekend commemoration.

Publicity surrounding the event also has spurred interest in the social history of wartime Southside — a culture, like in the rest of the South, that valued personal honor and valor above all other virtues, elevated as they were upon a platform built of human subjugation.

Such was the case at 19th century Black Walnut, where the action on the Halifax County side of the battle occurred. (The Union cavalry charges and the Confederate trench defense were spread out over the riverbank lowlands of the McPhail and Bruce farms. Mulberry Hill, the manse that Union Brigadier General James Wilson seized for a makeshift headquarters, was part of the McPhail property). Denizens of high society, the Simses were honored to receive one of Halifax County’s more notable letters from the period: a thank-you note penned by Robert E. Lee himself, written as the Confederate general was preparing the defense of Richmond in spring 1862. “Miss Maria C. Sims,” the letter is addressed. “I am very much obliged to you for the beautiful socks you have sent me. I value them most highly as an evidence of your kind and thoughtful consideration, which I gratefully appreciate & will ever remember.” The exemplar of Southern manners, General Lee closed, “Hoping some day to be able to thank you in person.”

The letter, housed at the Halifax-South Boston library, has long been celebrated as a prominent artifact of local history. It speaks to the influence of the leading families of the day. How many personal gifts, out of the many thousands received, would even the famously gracious General Lee have acknowledged under the duress of war? Not surprisingly, Black Walnut is a font of correspondence going more than two centuries, although much of the material is only now coming to light with the passing of Black Walnut’s most recent owner-occupant, Tucker C. Watkins IV, in 2012. His nephew, John Payne Thrift, formerly of South Boston and now living in Washington, D.C., has helped with the handling of the estate — which includes “boxes and boxes” of documents that the family has found stashed in the mansion’s out-of-the-way places.

The sheer mass of letters and papers is “mind-boggling,” says Thrift, who is studying for a degree in history at the University of the District of Columbia. “All these letters have come from a line of people who haven’t thrown away anything for the past 250 years,” he jokes. The finds have been both amusing — his great-great-grandmother’s will was tucked away in the pages of an old “Time” magazine — and eye-opening: The papers include slave records that may allow African-American families to trace their lineage with a certitude previously not possible. The papers are part of a recent archival donation by the Watkins family to the University of Virginia.

(Disclosure: This reporter shares the Sims-Garrett-Watkins ancestry of John Thrift, who is a cousin.)

In rummaging through boxes and piles, Thrift discovered a letter by Captain Benjamin L. Farinholt of the 53rd Virginia Infantry, overall leader of the Confederate defense of Staunton River bridge, penned six days after the battle and addressed to William Howson Sims, owner-operator of Black Walnut plantation. Farinholt was responding to a June 30, 1864, letter from Sims, apparently to complain about the Confederate garrison stationed on the grounds of Black Walnut in the aftermath of the bridge’s successful defense. The glow of victory apparently failed to fully blot out one of the qualities that contributed to the Confederacy’s downfall: bickering among allies and friends.

The issue at hand: the occupation of Sims’ croplands by a force estimated at more than 2,000 men — 1,200 serving in the military, plus some 900 enslaved blacks who cooked the meals, moved the wagons, and by Thrift’s reckoning, in all likelihood did much of the digging in the hurried preparations for trench warfare in the defense of Staunton River bridge.

The tone of Farinholt's letter is polite but laced with annoyance: "[Your] letter of the 30th received," Farinholt acknowledged. "Your idea that vacant fields should be [withheld from the Army's use] is a novel one to me as I think you will find it to be to all Virginians. When property that might be injured by government usage such for instance as grazing wheat, corn or oat fields ... it is customary and right to adopt the course indicated by the law and for which this law is intended, but I have yet to learn of any one desirous to prevent the government from using fields unoccupied by grain or hay," the Confederate captain wrote.

"The military necessity requires the occupation of your plantation I regret, and know the injury it must necessarily do your farm and the inconvenience it must put you to, but such has been and is being the case over all parts of Virginia," Farinholt wrote. "We should charge it to the calamity our whole nation is laboring under and not to individual commands that are merely instruments of the government we all have sacrificed so much to sustain."

The problem doesn't seem to have been foraging of Sims' crops by Confederate soldiers — the fields in question, after all, were empty. Rather, wrote Farinholt to Sims, "[t]he inference to be drawn from the post script of your letter is that servants have been depredating on you under the pretense of doing so by my orders. I most respectfully ask that any such cases [be] at once reported, you are doing both yourself and me injury by keeping quiet and permitting such parties to go unpunished."

Translation: Sims was likely upset by the fraternization taking place among his own slaves ("servants") and the black teamsters, cooks and laborers of the Confederate garrison. "At this point there were a lot of runaway slaves," observed Thrift. "I think what Sims is saying is, 'Keep your slaves away from mine.'"

Another letter found recently at Black Walnut — an exchange between William Watkins and his son, Tucker C. Watkins Sr., who had married the daughter of Benjamin and Maria Sims — alluded to a sensational wartime episode involving a rebellious slave: Robert Smalls, who 14 months earlier had commandeered a Confederate transport ship in Charleston harbor and sailed it to freedom behind the Union blockade.

"Dear Pa, This has been one of the darkest days of the Confederacy," wrote Tucker Watkins in the July 13, 1863, letter from Charleston, where he was stationed. The immediate source of his gloom was the fall of Vicksburg that same week, but "[t]here are thousands of rumors about our army under Lee — some very discouraging. An attack was said to be made on Charleston yesterday." Watkins, whose company was posted on the coastline to "keep the enemy from landing," had clearly gotten caught up in the swirl of rumors through the city: Federals "have stolen many negros from on the coast at night. The negros will go to the banks and will steal boats and go to the Yankee boats." The audacity of Smalls' takeover of the CSS Planter was, in fact, never to be repeated during the war, although the deed did help bring Lincoln around to the idea of accepting African-American enlistees for the war effort. In the Confederacy, by contrast, the setback fueled paranoia and fear of slave rebellion.

Thrift found other documents that speak to the uneasy mood of the times, one being a summer 1864 letter to William Sims from his wife, Sallie, who had temporarily relocated to Danville to escape the impact of war. (The letter was likely written shortly after the Battle of Staunton River bridge was fought.) "Brother was down to see me yesterday. He is very doleful [and] was down in [Richmond] last week," Sallie Sims wrote to her husband. "They have been up here trying to buy horses for artillery [and] hinted that the next move would be to press them into service — but I hardly think they will do that." She expressed concern over William Sims' cold: "I am anxious how you came on with your cough. I hope you take good care of yourself while I am away. Excuse this badly written letter as I am writing with a miserable pen. Farewell until I see you."

Meantime, William Sims had been engaged in the work of requisitioning supplies for the Confederate defense at Staunton River. A receipt from the period listed purchases of goods from Woodlawn, the nearby estate of John Coleman. A year prior, Black Walnut had made a more significant contribution to the Confederate cause: the assignment of four enslaved people (out of an estimated 116 at the plantation before war broke out) to the defense of Richmond. The 1860 census underscores the nature of Sims' vast wealth: \$57,000 worth of real estate and \$238,270 in personal property — a euphemism for chattel slaves.

The 1863 assignment of slaves for the defense of Richmond (required by law) comes with a footnote: One of the African-American men, named Royall, met his demise in the city in November 1864. Royall was 24 at the time he was shipped to Richmond to fulfill the plantation owners' obligations; prior to then, Black Walnut had been the only home he had ever known.

His death, reported in *The Richmond Daily Dispatch* under the headline, "Suicide of a Negro," came after two escape attempts in the short span of a few days. On his final and fateful bid for freedom, Royall jumped out a window of the Engineer Hospital building, on the corner of Nineteenth and Cary, and bolted in the direction of the waterfront. Pursued by armed guards, he "ran for the dock, pitched in, and was drowned," the newspaper reported. "His body was soon afterwards recovered, and Dr. Little, the coroner, called to view it: but, on learning the circumstances of his death, he declined to hold an inquest."

After doing his own research into the fate of the enslaved contingent, Thrift believes that among the three who survived, two likely returned after the war to sharecrop on Black Walnut land.



Like all such battles of the war, the Battle of Staunton River Bridge was fought to protect Confederate positions, not Confederate estates. There's a reason the local skirmish is called the Battle of Staunton River Bridge and not the Battle of Black Walnut or the Battle of Bruce-McPhail farms. (Although other than the government and Lee's army itself, no one had a greater stake in the preservation of the railroad bridge than the tobacco plantation owners of Southside Virginia.)

Battles are fought for tactical and strategic reasons. Wars are fought for causes. In this, the plantation elite exerted

enormous power in determining the direction and aims of the Confederacy. The South was a patrimonial society, built on a scaffold that reached down from the wealthy and influential planter class to the entrapped African-Americans who, against their will, provided the economic, social and political foundations for the breakaway nation. As white men of the South fought for home, country, and identity, the black population struggled for survival and to extract such scraps of dignity as they could manage amid their oppression.

In the plains below Black Walnut, where the fighting on June 25 raged, valor was achieved and legends were born, and when the crack of gunfire had ceased tales of victory rushed forth with the swiftness of advancing cavalry. The 150th anniversary celebration this weekend at Staunton River Battlefield Park will be a time to renew the memory of an event that Carroll Headpseth described so well: “the brilliant part played by a handful of ‘old men and young boys’ in stopping a large force of well-equipped Federal Cavalry and this saving the bridge and Lee’s one remaining supply and communications line to the South.”

After the battle, Grant’s Union army would forgo further assaults on Southside Virginia — a result, in part, of opportunities that arose elsewhere as the Union Army forced Lee into surrender at Appomattox. As the war wound down, Staunton River bridge would serve one last function: as the escape route for Jefferson Davis and the Confederate government in their hurried flight to Danville. Guards burned down the span after the cabinet crossed over into Halifax.

The divide that opened with the destruction of the covered bridge could well serve as a symbol of the cause for which so many had fought so courageously. No less than Ulysses S. Grant, the Confederacy’s implacable foe, recognized as much. At Appomattox, Grant wrote in his memoirs, “I felt like anything rather than rejoicing at the downfall of a foe who had fought so long and valiantly, and had suffered so much for a cause, though that cause was, I believe, one of the worst for which a people ever fought, and one for which there was the least excuse.

“I do not question, however, the sincerity of the great mass of those who were opposed to us ...”

This is why we celebrate the 150th sesquicentennial of the Civil War, and the deeds, blue and gray, that even today still fire the imagination. It is also why ongoing research into materials such as those found at Black Walnut — personal effects, letters, the secrets of the people who lived through the times — is so important to our own understanding of where America has been, and where it is headed.

Living history: it’s a phrase that sesquicentennial celebrants can expect to hear more than once this weekend at the battlefield park. And appropriately so: A Mississippian who came along not long after the Civil War generation may have expressed the point best. In “Requiem for a Nun,” wrote the author William Faulkner, “the past is never dead. It’s not even past.”