

Major William Wells and Mosby's Raid on Herndon Station

By Barbara Glakas

On Sunday, March 17, Mosby's Raid on Herndon Station will be reenacted at 11 a.m and 2 p.m. The Herndon Historical Society and the Herndon Chamber of Commerce are sponsoring the event with support from the Town of Herndon.

Many Herndon residents are familiar with Confederate Captain John S. Mosby's raid at Herndon Station on March 17, 1863. But few may be familiar with the story of a famous Union Officer who was also involved in that raid, Major William Wells.

William Wells was born in Vermont in 1837 and attended school at Kimball Union Academy in New Hampshire. When the Civil War broke out in 1861, William and three of his brothers joined the Union Army. He enlisted as a private and joined the First Vermont Cavalry. Within months he was promoted to 1st Lieutenant, and soon after to Captain. By 1862 he had earned the rank of Major.

He was only 27 when he rose to the rank of Brevet Major General. By the time he left the military in 1866 he held the rank of Brigadier General. General Philip Sheridan is widely quoted as saying of Wells that, "He is my ideal of a Cavalry officer." Wells had two monuments erected in his honor, one at Battery Park in Burlington, Vermont, and another at Gettysburg National Park in Pennsylvania.

After the war and upon his return to Vermont, Wells—who was married and had a son and daughter—became a successful businessman, managing a pharmaceutical company. In 1872, President Grant appointed him as customs collector for the state. He was president of several companies, was elected adjutant general, and in 1886 became a state senator. Wells, who was considered one of Vermont's most respected citizens, died suddenly of a heart ailment at the age of 54.

Wells' military career came close to being cut short at a federal outpost located at the Herndon Station on St. Patrick's Day 1863. A detachment made up of 25 members of the First Vermont Cavalry commanded by Lt. Alexander G. Watson had just been joined by Wells and two other officers. They came as a commission to investigate complaints that soldiers were stealing from local citizens.

A letter to the editor written by a Union soldier that later appeared in the *Burlington Free Press* validated the complaints. It said:

There has been a great deal of shooting of pickets at Dranesville, supposed to be by the farmers who live close by. Our men plunder and steal, and they take this way to have their revenge.

By midday, Wells' party had completed its investigation and was preparing to leave. Prior to leaving, however, Wells, along with Lt. Watson and two other fellow officers, accepted an offer to lunch at the nearby home of Nat and Kitty Hanna.

While members of the Wells party were enjoying lunch, Col. John Mosby and 40 of his men approached the Herndon Station. They were wearing blue overcoats over their grey uniforms. The Union soldiers did not recognize the approaching men as being Confederates until it was too late. Mosby's men quickly made their charge and captured the soldiers.

After the raid, Mosby noticed four "finely-equipped" horses tied in front of the Hanna house and his men quickly rushed to find the riders. Watson and one of the officers ran outside, only to be captured, while Wells and the fourth officer ran upstairs to hide in the attic. One of Mosby's rangers called for them to surrender and fired a shot through the ceiling, causing Major Wells to fall through the ceiling to the lower floor. He did not sustain any injuries.

Wells always appreciated the way that he and the other captured officers were treated by Mosby. Mosby allowed them to keep their horses for the ride to Culpeper, as opposed to making them walk. Once in Culpeper, they boarded a train to a Confederate prison in Richmond.

Luckily for Wells, this event did not harm his reputation or his military career. He spent seven weeks in the Libby Prison in Richmond. After his parole in 1863 he returned to his regiment, where he continued to distinguish himself in several military engagements. About four months after the raid at Herndon Station, he led a battalion of his regiment in a daring charge at Gettysburg. His gallantry during that event earned him a Medal of Honor.

According to oral tradition, Wells—or possibly one of his officers—may have returned to the Hanna house in Herndon to retrieve his pistol, which he had hidden in one of the walls of the house.

It is likely that there was a mutual respect between Mosby and Wells in the post-war days. Wells' daughter invited Mosby to her wedding but, for reasons unknown, he did not attend. Unlike most former Confederates, Mosby joined the Republican Party after the war. Some historians surmise that the good relations between Wells and Mosby may have been due to a combination of reasons including the fact that both were Republicans, Mosby's fair treatment of Wells after the raid at Herndon Station, and a shared desire for reconciliation between the North and the South.