

## The Lowe's Island Incident

By Barbara Glakas

Virginia seceded from the Union in April of 1861. The first major battle of the Civil War occurred in Virginia, the First Battle of Bull Run (or Manassas), which occurred in July of 1861. It was a Confederate victory. Other early but lesser-known battles also occurred in areas close to Herndon, including the Battle of Balls Bluff in October of 1861, which occurred in the Leesburg area and was also a Confederate victory. The Battle of Dranesville occurred in December of 1861 in the Dranesville area, near the intersection of what is now Leesburg Pike (Route 7) and Georgetown Pike (Route 193). That was a Union victory.

However, sandwiched in between the Battles of Bull Run and Balls Bluff was a little-known incident that occurred at Lowes Island in September of 1861.

Lowe's Island sits along the Potomac River, at the eastern corner of Loudoun County, bordered by Fairfax County. It is located five miles north of the town of Herndon. At that time, in 1861, the Potomac River acted as an unofficial boundary line between Union and Confederate forces. The Confederates encamped in Leesburg and Centreville. Union forces, that had crossed part of the Potomac in Northern Virginia to help protect Washington, D.C., encamped in the Langley area. One mission of the Union forces was to secure the fords along the Potomac.

In the meanwhile, the secession of Virginia prompted some local Confederate-supporting residents of Dranesville and Herndon to form a Home Guard, a volunteer local militia to help protect the homeland. According to Charles Preston Poland Jr., who wrote, *Dunbarton, Dranesville, Virginia*,

“The Confederate sympathy of the Dranesville citizenry was due to in large part to the institution of slavery which was well-established in the area before the eighteenth century.”

In the diary of a local Methodist minister, he noted that the people of the Dranesville area had voted for the Ordinance of Secession, “...almost unanimous – 107 to 4.”

One of the men who voted to support the Union was Benjamin Bready, older brother of Herndon's future first mayor, Isaiah Bready. He was a farmer whose family came to the Herndon area from Pennsylvania in the 1850s. Other Unionists who lived in the area were Daniel Borden, Dennis Ormsby, Henry Bishop, Henry Biggs, Nelson Voorhees, and Mine[o]r Crippen.

Voorhees was also a farmer. His family came from New York and moved to the Dranesville area in 1851. Once asked to join the Confederate militia, he fled to Washington. Later, he went back to New York for about a year. Crippen was a farmer as well, and came to the Dranesville area from New York. His descendants would stay in the Herndon area, later living on Pine Street. One of his descendents operated a furniture store on Station Street, and another later became Herndon's first Fire Chief in circa 1920.

In his article, *Dranesville: A Troubled Town*, Ryan Quint said,

“Nineteenth century voting was a public affair. Rather than secret ballots, the leanings of each voter were public knowledge. With this information in hand, the secessionists at Dranesville began to target the Unionist minority. The town’s men who did not join the Confederate army instead became a Home Guard who patrolled the area around the town and continued to harass local Unionists who did not make themselves scarce. They armed themselves with a wide array of weapons.”

Some of the locals who were part of the Confederate Home Guard included William Day, John T. Day, John B. Farr, Thomas Gunnell, and Philip Carper. The Day brothers were both doctors who lived next to each other on Leesburg Pike in the Dranesville area. John Day served as Herndon’s doctor.

Nathaniel Hanna of Herndon was a Unionist, whose family was from New York. However, he joined the Home Guard out of peer pressure. He lived in a small house at what is now 681 Monroe Street, (now home to Sacred Roller Skate Supply), along with his wife, Catherine “Kitty” Kitchen Hanna and their young son.

Someone else who tried to skirt the line and not upset either side was Charles W. Coleman, who operated a store and public house along Leesburg Pike, across from the Day brothers’ homes. The Coleman family was a very prominent family, having lived in the area for almost 140 years. One of Charles’s ancestors had built the first house in what is now Herndon (in the area behind the current Herndon Middle School), presumably in the 1770s. Charles’s father, who died in January of 1861, had opened a tavern in the Dranesville area along Sugarland Run. It was so popular in the mid-1700s that George Washington was known to stop there several times, according to Washington’s personal ledger.

Charles W. Coleman married into the Farr family, making him the son-in-law of John B. Farr. There was also a relationship between the Coleman and the Gunnell families, due to Charles’s paternal Uncle, Samuel Coleman, marrying Sarah Gunnell. John Gunnell was Sarah’s brother and was a wealthy land owner of hundreds of acres; he also owned 23 enslaved people. John Gunnell and his brother, Richard Henry Gunnell, were both leading figures in Dranesville. They lived near each other and helped to muster soldiers and procure provisions for the Confederates.

Members of the Home Guard harassed Unionists who lived in the area. Ryan T. Quint, who wrote the book, *Dranesville, A Northern Virginia Town in the Crossfire of Forgotten Battle*, described some of those harassing incidents.

Daniel Borden recalled that John T. Day had warned him that if Borden went to Washington to join Lincoln’s army, then Day would burn his property and massacre his family. Borden was later arrested by the Home Guard for the crime of being a Unionist. The Home Guard group included the Day brothers and John B. Farr. After Borden was released, he fled to Washington. Another Unionist, Dennis Ormsby, said that William Day had threatened to hang him. According to Unionist Henry Bishop, the Home Guard made it their business to hunt and prosecute Union men.

Unionist Nelson Voorhees recalled that he had once heard John Day say that if Day had his way, he would kill all the damned Yankee sons of bitches in the country because they were all abolitionists.

When Bishop was arrested, he was taken to Charles W. Coleman's store, which had become a headquarters for the Rebel troops. Coleman later admitted to feeding Confederates at his store but, according to Quint, Coleman had later rhetorically asked, "What would have been the consequence had I refused?"

In Kitty Kitchen Hanna's memoir, *Reminiscences of an Oldest Inhabitant*, written by Virginia Carter Castleman, Kitty recalled that her Unionist husband, Nathaniel, told her that he joined the Home Guard, but he added, "I must tell you, though, that as soon as ever they ask me to fight, I'm off, 'cause I won't fight against the Union."

Kitty described:

"The Home Guard was got up here, an' every man who wouldn't sign up for it was given forty-eight hours to get out'n the place an' the State. I'd been out to Mother's that day, an' when I come home toward evenin', there wasn't a body in sight, and our mare was gone from the stable."

It was later that Hanna joined the Union Army. At one point, Hanna left for Washington, temporarily leaving his wife and mother-in-law in Herndon. Kitty later recalled that one night a group of riders that she described as "militia," with their guns and bayonets, banged on her door, looking for Nathaniel. After a few minutes they left, but Kitty said she was so terrified that she later stayed at a neighbor's house.

Home Guardsmen roamed around the nearby woods of Dranesville with weapons, looking for Union men. And the local Unionists were always being watched and pressured. Needless to say, many of the Unionists around the Dranesville area feared for their lives.

That brings us to August of 1861. A unit from the 34<sup>th</sup> New York Infantry had made its way south to help protect Washington. They controlled about 17 miles of the Potomac riverfront on the north side, and were tasked to guard the Chesapeake & Ohio Canal. Just across the river was the unknown land of Virginia, which they were eager to see. They had frequently sent unofficial foraging parties across the river to Lowe's Island. McCarty and Ann Lowe lived on the island and were furious at the Union soldiers who took food and horses from their property. Out of frustration, McCarty Lowe traveled to Dranesville and reported what was happening to three Confederate soldiers who had been patrolling the south side of the river, Captains Gardner, Harvey, and Miller.

The officers created a plan to intercept the Federal soldiers on one of their foraging expeditions, but they needed help, so they called on the Dranesville Home Guard. They gathered about a dozen men.

In the meantime, on September 16<sup>th</sup>, Union New York Captain Wells Sponable, received orders to obtain as much information as possible about the Confederates who were understood to be

stationed at Dranesville. The mission was to be a quick reconnaissance, so Sponable took a small patrol of about twelve soldiers to cross the Potomac River, which included Private Oliver Darling, Private Robert Gracey, and Corporals Christian Zugg and Cyrus Kellogg. Some of those soldiers also intended to obtain some corn from Lowe's Island while there.

Sponable took the lead in a single file, with Darling and Gracey behind him, and the others further back, bringing up the rear. When close to the cornfield Sponable heard someone give a command to fire and then the air exploded with a volley of gunfire. Sponable dropped to the ground to take cover and returned fire with his revolver. Both Darling and Gracey were hit, laying on the ground, appearing to be dead.

Sponable ran out of ammunition and decided to run back to the Potomac. He swam as the rebels continued to take shots at him. He made it back to the Maryland side. Zugg had been hit in the cheek but made a quick retreat to the river. He stayed in the river and kept just his mouth and nostrils out of the water for about three hours until he was rescued. However, as it ended up, the two privates, Darling and Gracey were not dead after all.

Gracey was shot in his shoulder. The bullet ricocheted and broke a rib and then exited his back. There are conflicting reports on whether Darling was already dead. However, Quint wrote:

“Oliver Darling soon found himself face to face with Captain Miller. Darling raised his rifle but the gun ‘would not go off.’ The two combatants closed on one another, and Darling reached out and grabbed the Confederate ‘by the throat.’ Miller tried to grab Darling’s Enfield [rifle]. As the two struggled, Philip Carper, a member of the Dranesville Home Guard, ran up with a pistol, put the ‘pistol muzzle to [Darling’s] heart’ and then, as Robert Gracey watched helplessly, ‘fired his revolver at Darling, putting five bullets into him, killing him on the spot.’”

But Mr. Lowe was not finished with Gracey. Holding a pistol, he walked up to Gracey as he lay on the ground and shot him twice. One of the bullets went through Gracey and another lodged in his lung. Both Gracey and Kellogg were taken prisoner, back to Charles Coleman's house. Kellogg was sent to Richmond as a prisoner of war. Gracey stayed at Coleman's house for about two weeks where he was tended to by Coleman. While there, both Doctors Day saw him but they reportedly refused him treatment.

Thomas Coleman, William Day, and Stephen Farr were known to have later gone back out to the ambush site. They emptied Darling's pockets of money and letters, and stripped his body naked. Day gave some of Darling's clothes to his enslaved people.

Back at Coleman's house, Gracey paid a man named Jimmy to go back out to where the ambush occurred to bury Darling's body. Jimmy apparently did a quick job of the burial and did not bury him very deep. As a result, the body was later discovered by hogs and they ate it.

By October, Gracey was transferred to the Fairfax County Court House and was put in a hospital, where he was given doses of opium. Gracey was able to escape by putting some of his saved opium into his guards' coffee, putting them to sleep. It took him three days, but under the cover

of darkness Gracey finally made it back to the Potomac River and to the encampment of the 34<sup>th</sup> New York.

In November, three fugitive enslaved people who had been enslaved by Eliza Coleman (Charles and Thomas's mother) fled behind Union lines and walked into the federal camp at Langley and described what they had witnessed the men of the Home Guard doing in Dranesville. They also specifically reported on the Lowe's Island ambush incident, as they had witnessed William Day returning to Dranesville with Darling's clothing in hand. They also knew which enslaved people the clothing had been given to. One of the witnesses, Caroline Jackson, named 14 men who had participated in the ambush. The federals gathered the names and decided to apprehend the Dranesville men. Union Colonel George D. Bayard, a commander of a cavalry regiment, was ordered to arrest the accused men.

Bayard and his men entered Dranesville on the morning of November 27. His men kicked in several doors of homes throughout Dranesville and arrested six men: William Day, John Day, Charles Coleman, Richard Gunnell, John DeBell, and John Farr. They were unable to initially find Philip Carper and Thomas Coleman. Those two had heard that the federals were coming to Dranesville. They and a few others hid in the woods and fired their guns on the federals. However, they were eventually captured. Thomas Coleman died in that exchange. He was buried in the cemetery at the Liberty Church of Dranesville (now the Dranesville United Methodist Church). The others were sent to Washington where they were locked up in the Old Capitol Prison at the corner of 1<sup>st</sup> and A Streets northeast.

In addition to the testimony of Caroline Jackson, there was also the testimony of other Unionists who went to Washington to report what had been going on in Dranesville. Additionally, Union detectives were sent to Dranesville to investigate the charges against the imprisoned Dranesville men. While in prison, Philip Carper wrote to his sister, warning her to be careful as to what she said to the investigators, asking her not to tell anyone what she knew about the men who were involved in "the fight on the river."

A special military commission was set up to determine the fate of those who had been arrested for the crimes they allegedly committed. Some of the captives claimed their innocence. For instance, Charles W. Coleman made a plea for his innocence based on his exemplary conduct, and the fact that he had never taken up arms against the United States. He also made a hardship argument, saying he had a wife, three small children, and a sick sister and her children, all of whom depended on him. He wrote many letters asking for an explanation for his arrest, even to Secretary of State, William Seward, asking that Seward allow him to take an oath of allegiance to the United States.

Dr. William Day claimed he had nothing to do with the ambush at Lowe's Island. He also said he served as the surgeon on the staff of a Virginia regiment at Manassas, and had provided medical support to both Union and Confederate soldiers, but no evidence could be found to corroborate that.

Kitty Kitchen Hanna recalled:

“[Dr. John Day] an’ his brother, Doctor Bill, was put in old Capitol Prison... The folks got up a petition an’ everybody signed it, to get’ em out, for they was good an’ useful men, an’ badly needed in our country.”

While in prison, the Day brothers could hear what they thought were gallows being constructed. According to Quint, John Day “prayed often and loud upon his knees to be spared such a fate.”

Many of these men spent months in prison. The imprisonment situation was complicated for several reasons. They were arrested by the military and were technically in custody of the War Department, much like prisoners of war. And yet, they were civilians, and so they were also considered to be political prisoners. Also, according to Poland, “A significant factor in the delay of release of Charles Coleman and others was the transferring of supervision of political prisons and prisoners of war from the State Department to the Department of War.”

The Dranesville men continued to languish in prison. Eventually, Seward’s secretary wrote to Washington’s Provost Marshall about Charles Coleman, requesting more information and suggesting that, “unless there are well-founded reasons to the contrary, the prisoner may be released upon the usual conditions.” And those usual conditions typically consisted of the prisoners taking an oath of allegiance to the United States, and agreeing not to give aid and comfort to the Confederates. By March of 1862, the special commission was ready to meet to start their proceedings. Seward’s secretary suggested that it would be preferable for the commission to dispose of the cases of the Dranesville men as soon as possible.

Quint explained that the seven men who were being held in the Old Capitol Prison had been charged with various things such as, “murdering and robbing Federal soldiers at Lowe’s Island, VA,” and, “aiding and comforting the insurgents and oppressing Union men.” On March 21, thirty-six pages of testimony were made against William Day. Needing more time to deliberate about William Day’s case, the commission sent him back to the Old Capitol Prison. Three days later they heard cases against Charles, George and Richard Coleman, John Day, and James and John Farr. All were released except Charles Coleman and John Day. The next day, John DeBell and Richard Coleman were released.

A few days later the commission heard the case on Philip Carper, who stated he knew nothing about the Lowes’s Island ambush or who participated in it, saying he was at home with his mother at the time. But Carper also claimed he had joined the Confederate army back in September, and any action he would have taken were taken as a soldier, most likely stated at an effort to get released on a prisoner exchange. Again, as the commission deliberated Carper’s case, they sent him back to the Old Capitol Prison.

By the end of March, all the Dranesville cases had been heard. By April, the commission had still refused to release Carper and William Day, due to the serious charges against them.

On June 4, 1862, a Justice of the Peace who lived in Washington, John S. Hollingshead, wrote to the Assistant Secretary of War. Hollingshead asked that John Day and Charles Coleman be released after taking the oath of allegiance. Regarding William Day, however, Hollingshead suggested that Day’s fate be left to Hollingsworth, saying that Day would also be willing to take

the oath, and that a \$20,000 bond would be posted to assure Day would fulfill all his allegiant obligations. That letter helped move things along, and John Day and Charles Coleman were soon released.

Although the War Department was very suspicious of William Day's and Philip Carper's claims of having served with the Confederate army, the War Department ultimately considered them to be prisoners of war and decided to process them through the prisoner exchange program. By the end of July of 1862, Carper and William Day had been released and the government ended its case on the men of Dranesville.

The Lowe's Island incident was a precursor to the Battle of Dranesville, which would occur three months later, where civilians and soldiers would once again collide, this time involving about 9,000 soldiers. But that is a story left for another day.

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*About this column: "Remembering Herndon's History" is a regular Herndon Patch feature offering stories and anecdotes about Herndon's past. The articles are written by members of the Herndon Historical Society. Barbara Glakas is a member. A complete list of "Remembering Herndon's History" columns is available on the Historical Society website at [www.herndonhistoricalsociety.org](http://www.herndonhistoricalsociety.org).*

*The Herndon Historical Society operates a small museum that focuses on local history. It is housed in the Herndon Depot in downtown Herndon on Lynn Street and is open every Sunday from noon until 3:00. Visit the Society's website at [www.herndonhistoricalsociety.org](http://www.herndonhistoricalsociety.org), and the Historical Society's Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/HerndonHistory> for more information.*

*Note: The Historical Society is seeking volunteers to help keep the museum open each Sunday. If you have an interest in local history and would like to help, contact [HerndonHistoricalSociety@gmail.com](mailto:HerndonHistoricalSociety@gmail.com).*