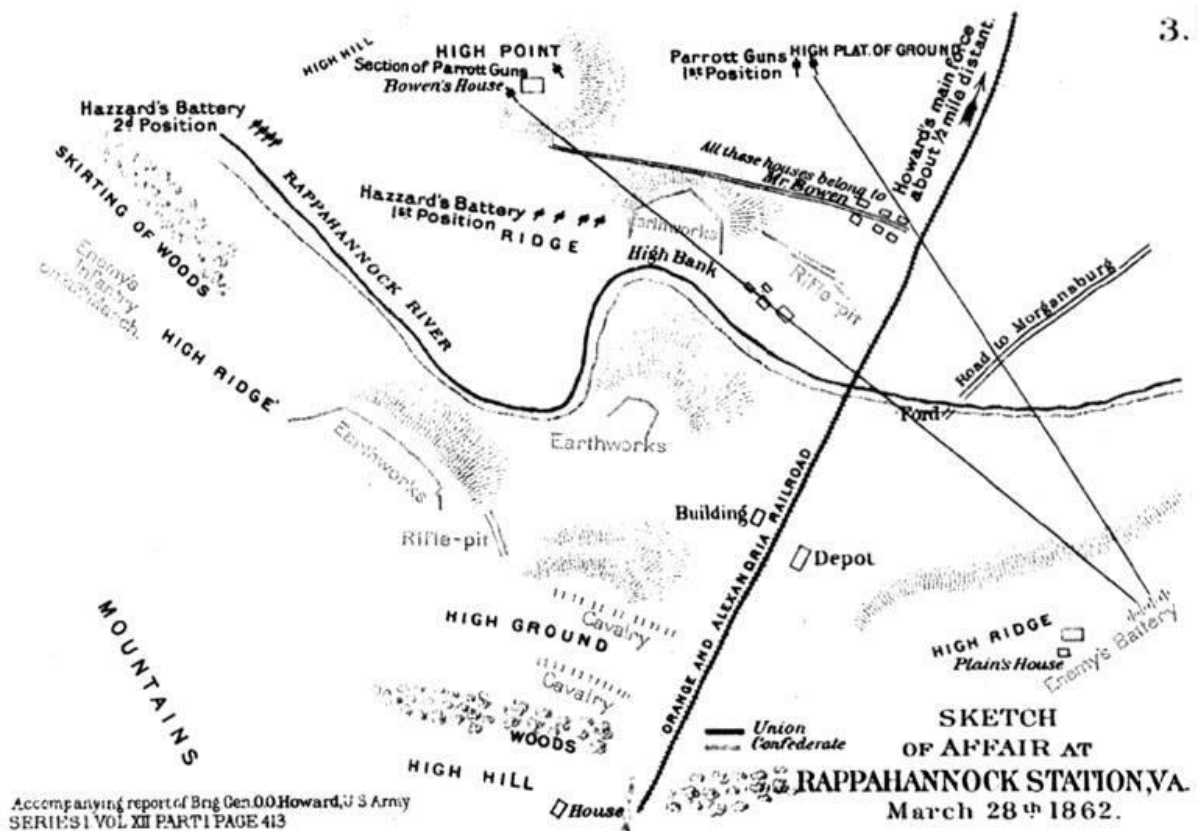


Rappahannock Station, Virginia: How a Railroad, a River, and the Civil War Put a Small Town on the Map

By Mary Munson Root, LS

If the art of Warfare lies in a masterful combination of fortification, supply/communication lines, and tactical knowledge of terrain, then war's artistry lay in its maps. The American Civil War began with both sides scrambling to procure maps by any means possible, but these ordinary maps showing towns, rivers, railroads and roads were only useful for arranging the concentration of large bodies of troops, or following the operations of a campaign. Military maps were needed. Generals, as strategists and tacticians, needed accurate knowledge of hills for command positions, woods for cover, grasslands for forage, camp sites, good roads and railroads, river-fords or bridges and their access points, and knowledge of the elevations and distances for cavalry, artillery and troop movements. A knowledge of Civil War military strategy helps. One critical component of every campaign was the safety of the supply train. An army advancing from its base with its fighting strength forward had to have a road or railroad dedicated to the task of moving food, artillery, ammunition and men forward, while parties of sick and wounded men moved to the rear. This line was always an army's weak point, and the great generals of the war knew it. In the case of a small town called Rappahannock Station (today's Remington) in Virginia, its placement on the Rappahannock River and obvious military features including a rail-line and bridge, and two river crossings caused it to be fought over repeatedly. Both armies sought to hold the ground, control the railroad supply line, and maintain the natural fords as a tactical advantage. Accordingly, Rappahannock Station was mapped, occupied, and fortified by some of the finest in the Civil War field.



Affair at Rappahannock Station. Reproduction of map accompanying Gen. O. O. Howard's Report of March 28, 1862, from the 1891-95 Atlas to Accompany the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies, 1861-65., Plate 105, Map 3.

In the wet and muddy spring of 1862, Confederate General Joe Johnston had his army positioned along Bull Run and the Potomac River. Johnston grew uneasy with this line, realizing McClellan could strike at any point from the Blue Ridge Mountains down to Aquia Creek, and thus be on the flank or in the rear of the army around Manassas and Occoquan. Personally reporting to Jefferson Davis in Richmond, Johnston stated unequivocally that his army must fall back farther south before the roads were dry. When Davis asked to what line the retreat would be conducted, Johnston replied that he did not know, being unfamiliar with the country between Manassas and Richmond. Davis was shocked at this response, writing: AThat a general should have selected a line which he himself considered untenable, and should not have ascertained the topography of the country in his rear was inexplicable on any other theory than that he had neglected the primary duty of a commander. Johnston was hampered by the lack of military maps but he dared not leave Richmond unguarded; there was no time to lose. Amid reports of enemy activity at Harpers Ferry to his west and Dumfries to his east, Johnston issued orders for all his forces east of the Blue Ridge to fall back to the line of the Rappahannock River. However, the impassable roads that temporarily kept McClellan at bay severely affected the

orderliness of the retreat. It was chaotic. Heavy guns, supplies, food and equipment eventually had to be abandoned, as the sole way out was the single-track Orange and Alexandria railroad to Rappahannock Station.

Union General Oliver Howard, ordered to take a reconnoitering force southward, advanced down the railroad line and came upon Jeb Stuart's rear scouts about eight miles from the Rappahannock river. These scouts were led by Stuart's trusted chief topographic engineer, Captain W.W. Blackford, an ideal choice. Blackford had previously mapped the terrain, and was able to check Howard's advance by harassing the enemy at every step. It became a running skirmish, as Gen. Howard's report indicates:

As we pressed on they discharged their carbines at my scouts and retired. My scouts and skirmishers returned the fire. Beyond effective range no harm was done on either side. As soon as the Parrott guns under Lieutenant Rundell reached a fair position I had him open fire on a company of the enemy just in the edge of some woods. They fled toward our left. This operation was repeated constantly during the march. Sometimes one squadron and sometimes as many as three appeared and disappeared on our front and flanks. We constantly pressed forward toward the Rappahannock, driving the cavalry before us till within 3 miles of that river. Here a force of infantry was reported advancing at double-quick. I formed in order of battle; ordered the advance guard forward into a good position. I soon ascertained that the remnant of the enemy's infantry on this side of the river was running for a train of cars nearer to me than themselves. As soon as possible Lieutenant Rundell fired into the train.

Luckily for Johnston's men on the train, the shell did no harm, and the train disappeared over the bridge at Rappahannock Station into the safety of Culpeper County. Stuart's cavalry and scouts came across last, splashing through the ford after torching pre-set charges beneath the rail bridge. Howard's men heard a heavy explosion, much like the blasting of stone, and subsequently reported Rappahannock bridge burned (four-span bridge). One pier blown up; two stone piers left. It was a Howe truss bridge. Depot buildings of the station near Rappahannock river burned.

There were two viable fords at Rappahannock Station, one downstream of the railroad near the intersection with Tinpot Run, and another upstream at the serpentine bend, this latter being the popular site for pontoon bridges. Union topographic engineer Washington Roebling wrote a 3-page Report on Riflepits + Earthworks thrown up at Rapphk St. and Beverly Ford (June 12, 1863) which included this information on the lower crossing: The ford is 200 yds. before R.R. Bridge + Dam, running diagonally across the stream, water up to horses belly; bottom good; approaches excellent on both sides; river 200' wide; two hundred feet below ford the water is 15' drop + 150' wide; river passable for infantry at Bridge. But Roebling wasn't entirely satisfied with the defenses at Rappahannock Station, and his report provides an insight into the mind of a great military topographer:

It is necessary to hold the two hills on the other side in order to defend the place successfully, if attacked in earnest. Both A + B are subjected to a flank fire from E + F at long range, in addition to a front fire. There are no commanding positions which would control E. or F. from our side. When Gen. McDowell held the line of the Rappahannock last summer during Pope's retreat, he occupied C + D, having access to D by a bridge in rear of it, this bridge was swept away compelling us to retire to this side, and as soon as the enemy got possession of D + C we were forced away from A + B. The following work was done there during day + night of the 18th; two epaulments thrown up on A. for two guns each + the old work on hill B (secesh) was converted for a two gun battery to fire on D. A line of rifle pits was dug from the run east of R.R., across the road to the ford, 2 mile down. Rifle pits were dug on the front slope of hill A and three short lines of rifle pits to the right of B. The rifle pits on C + D built by us last year are still underworked.



With due south at the top of the page, Washington Roebling made this sketch of Rappahannock Station on June 12, 1863, noting natural and manmade features, and fortification changes made while he was there. Manuscripts and Special Collections, New York State Library, Albany. Copyright © 1999 by Earl B. McElfresh in Maps and Mapmakers of the Civil War. NY: Harry N. Abrams, Inc.

General Robert E. Lee was not satisfied with the fortifications at Rappahannock Station either. After the Battle of Bristoe Station (October 14, 1863), and with winter approaching, Lee moved back to Rappahannock Station, and made alterations to the fortifications Roebling had seen.

Lee wrote, "I caused the works he had constructed on the north side of the river, near the bridge, to be converted into a tete-de-pont, to defend a pontoon bridge, which we had laid down at this point, constructing at the same time lines of rifle pits on each side of the stream. The 1879 Encyclopedia Britannica defines Tetes-de-pont, or Bridgeheads:

Works, open at the gorge [mouth], whose flanks rest upon a river, designed to cover one or more bridges. The best situation for these works is the re-entering sinuosity of a river. As Tetes-de-pont (Fig. 49) are usually constructed for the purpose of enabling a retiring army to cross a river in order, and to check an enemy pressing upon it, their trace and profile should be such as to secure this double advantage to the greatest extent possible.

General Lee reinforced his tetes-de-pont with four pieces of artillery in the redoubt on the north bank and eight others in a similar work on the south side, plus sunken batteries for two guns and rifle pits arranged to command the railroad embankment. Lee reasoned, "The pontoon bridge was considered a sufficient means of communication, as in the event of the troops north of the river being compelled to withdraw, their crossing would be covered by the artillery and infantry in the works on the south side. Hays' brigade was in the rifle pits on the north side of the river, reinforced by Hoke's; Early's division occupied the south bank east of the railroad, Anderson's division on the west side, and Rodes' division was stationed at Kelly's Ford.

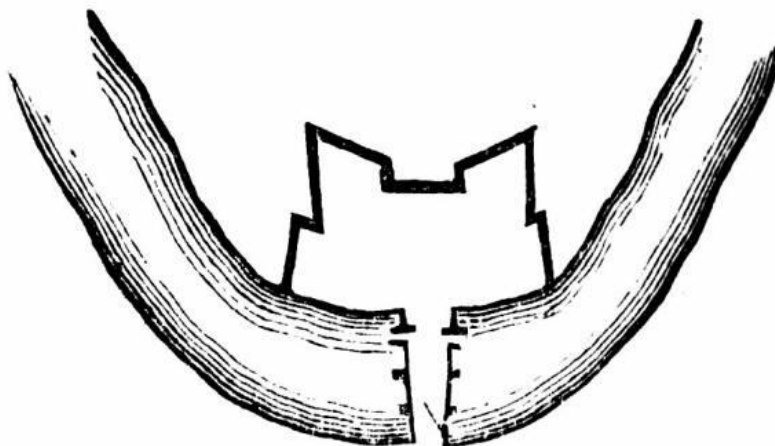


FIG. 49.—Tête-de-pont.

From 1879 Encyclopedia Britannica.

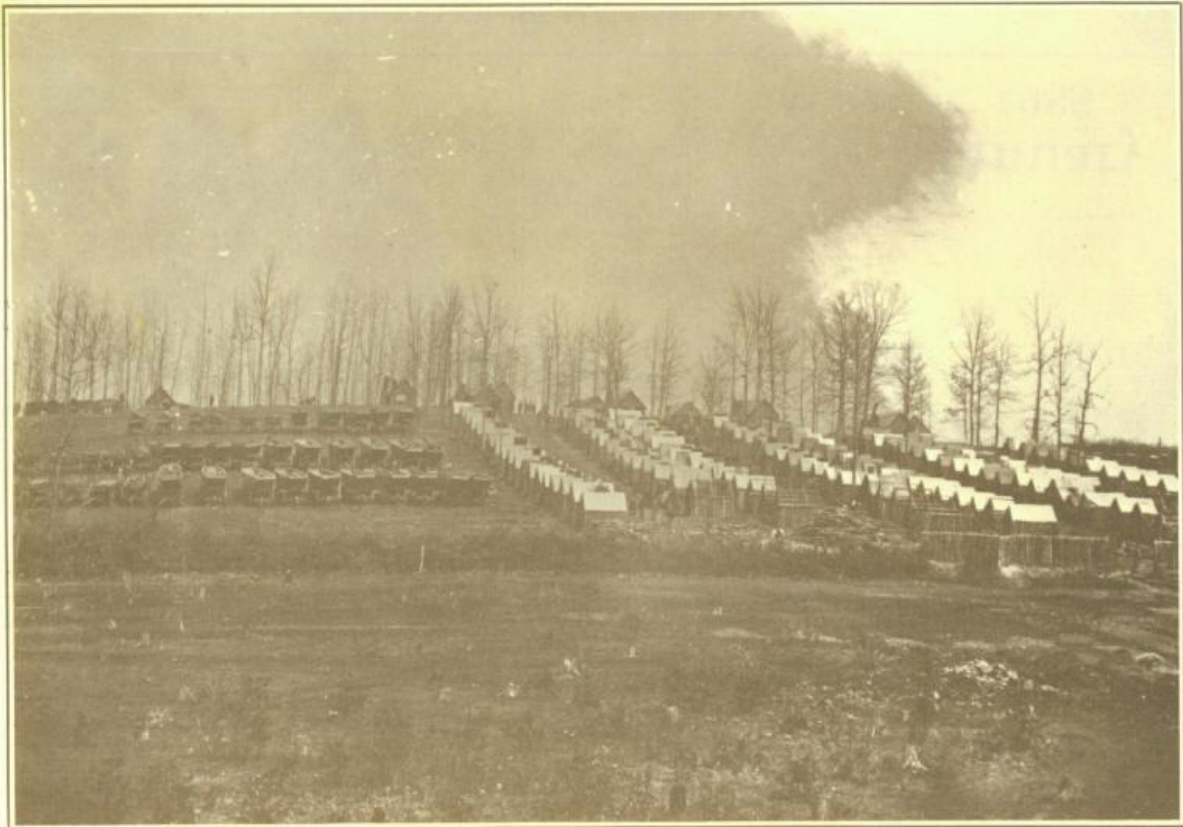
According to Lee's report: It was not known whether this demonstration was intended as a serious attack or only to cover the movement of the force that had crossed at Kelly's Ford, but the lateness of the hour and the increasing darkness induced the belief that nothing would be

attempted until morning. He was mistaken. Under cover of darkness, and aided by a strong wind that effectually prevented any movement from being heard, Sedgwick's infantry rushed the works and engaged Hays' men in hand to hand combat. The 6th Maine Volunteers breached the Confederate line as the 5th Wisconsin swarmed over the walls of the western redoubt. No information of the attack was received on the south side of the river until too late for the artillery stationed there to aid in repelling it, and fear of injury to their own captured men further prevented that action. 1670 Confederate soldiers were killed, wounded, or captured. Three Congressional Medals of Honor were awarded (to Union soldiers) for gallantry in action. In the quiet days following the battle a young man named Robert Knox Sneden prepared maps illustrating the terrain and critical positions for General Meade's report to Washington. The Army of the Potomac went into winter quarters around Brandy Station, with the 50th New York Engineers assigned to Rappahannock Station. Lee's Army retired much further south than originally planned, to Orange County.



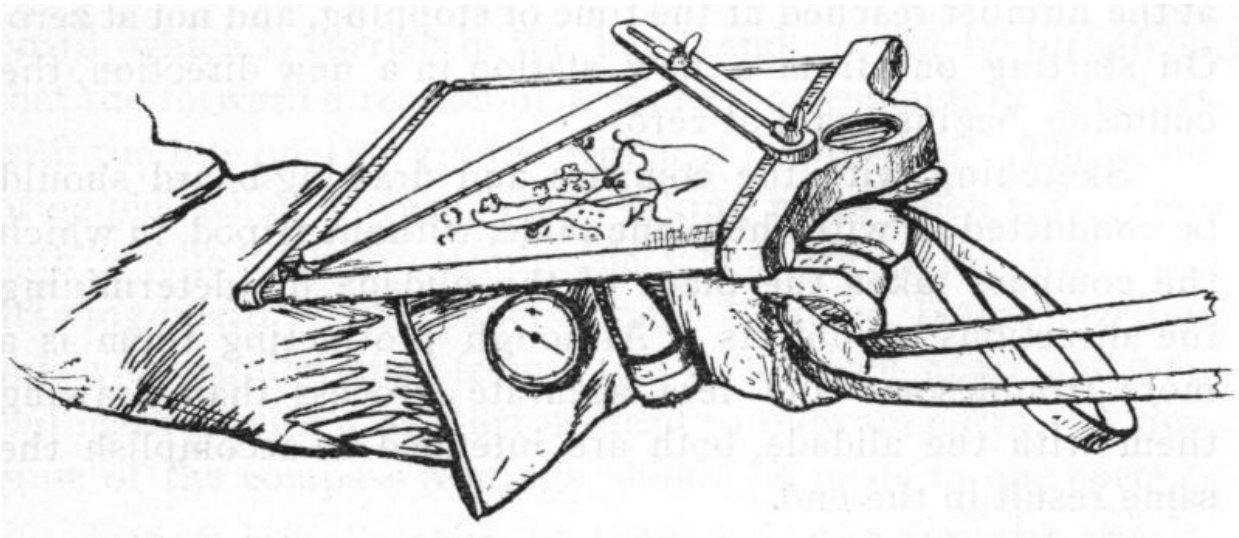
Battle of Kelly's Ford November 7, 1863, with Rappahannock Station shown at upper left. Private Robert Knox Sneden made this sketch at the behest of Union General Birney eleven days after the Confederate loss. Copyright © 2001 by the Virginia Historical Society.

Extant maps tell a story of war's progress through Rappahannock Station. Under extreme time and weather conditions, often mapping on the fly from horseback, Civil War topographers produced maps conveying signature Rappahannock Station features, its hills and banks, river, fords, and railroad. The constant elements provided reference for continuous fortification changes. The culminating moment for all those maps came just after dusk on November 7, 1863. That strategic and well-executed assault by General Meade's Union forces would signal the beginning of defeat for the South; Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia would never cross the Rappahannock River to threaten the Nation's Capital again.



Timothy H. O'Sullivan, March, 1864
The precisioned camp of the 50th New York Engineers at Rappahannock Station, today's Remington in March, 1864. The same site had possibly been in use since the previous winter, and hundreds of similar camps extended south from the Warrenton area. Two months later the pontoon boats at left were hitched, and U.S. Grant's armies began their final campaign of attrition: to The Wilderness and the road to Appomattox.

The precisioned camp of the 50th New York Engineers at Rappahannock Station, today's Remington in March, 1864. Two months later the pontoon boats at left were hitched, and U.S. Grant's armies began their final campaign of attrition: to the Wilderness and the road to Appomattox. Photographed by Timothy H. O'Sullivan, original in the Library of Congress.



Means of sketching from the saddle during the Civil War. Scales and pencils were often secured by cord to the mapmaker's saddle or person. From Root's *Military Topography and Sketching*, 2nd Ed. 1896.

-By permission of Professional Surveyor Magazine, "History Corner," August 2005.

Time-Line of Events, *Rappahannock Station* (Remington), Virginia:

1862

i **1862. McDowell Map** - Union-issue. Reconnaissance by John J. Young and Wm. H. Paine.

◆ **March 28. Affair at Rappahannock Station.** Confederates evacuate Manassas Junction under orders by General Joe Johnston to fall back to the line of the Rappahannock. Heavy guns, supplies, and equipment are abandoned as the sodden roads are impassable, and the sole way out is the single-track Orange & Alexandria railroad. The bridge at Rappahannock Station is blown up and burned behind the retreating forces, under covering fire from Capt. W.W. Blackford's men (First Virginia Cavalry). See *Official Reports, Vol. 12, Part 1, Pgs 412-417. iMap accompanies Brig. Gen. O. Howard's report.*

i **March, 1862. Timothy O'Sullivan Photography series - Rappahannock Station.**

◆ **May 8.** Stonewall Jackson's **Shenandoah Valley campaign** begins.

◆ **May 31-June 1:** During the Battle of Seven Pines, **Robert E. Lee** takes over command of the Confederate army from the wounded Gen. Johnston.

◆ **August 17.** Lieutenant General James Longstreet CSA First Corps moves up the Rappahannock River from Kelly's Ford to **Rappahannock Station**, placing Col. J. B. Walton's batteries to bear on the Union forces holding the rebuilt Orange & Alexandria railroad bridge from both sides of the river. Under a barrage of cannon fire, the Federals are forced to abandon their tete-de-pont. C.S.A. brigades of Brig. Gens. N.G. Evans and D.R. Jones occupy that position only to find it untenable. The north knoll is exposed to crossfire from the other bank. Col. S.D. Lee, ordered to position his batteries, joins Walton in firing upon the south bank, and the Union forces retreat, taking advantage of a severe rainstorm to do so, and somehow managing to burn the pontoon bridge and private dwellings in the area.

◆ **August 22-25.** Nearly becoming trapped between the Rapidan and Rappahannock Rivers, General John Pope realizes his peril and moves his forces to the north bank of the Rappahannock River, holding both sides of the O & A Railroad at **Rappahannock Station**. There Pope receives a wire from General-in-Chief Henry Halleck: AStand firm on that line until I can help you. Fight hard, and aid will soon come. On August 23, General J.E.B. Stuart's cavalry conducts a daring reconnaissance behind Union lines in Fauquier County, raiding Pope's headquarters at Catlett Station. Stuart raids Warrenton and obtains intelligence on the disposition of the Union Army of Virginia which Generals Lee and Jackson use to plan the Second Battle of Manassas (Bull Run). Jackson's wing marches via Thoroughfare Gap to capture Bristoe Station and destroy Federal supplies at Manassas Junction while Pope's forces are engaged along the Rappahannock river. When Pope discovers Jackson's position, he marches to meet him in order to save Washington. The two armies meet at Manassas.

August 23. Forbes, Edwin. Sketch of Rappahannock Station.

◆ **August 28. Second Battle of Manassas.** Confederate victory.

◆ **September 17. Battle of Antietam.** Heavy losses for both sides.

◆ **November 7.** General McClellan receives Lincoln's order relieving him of command.

◆ **December 13. Battle of Fredericksburg.** Confederate victory.

1863

◆ **January 1.** President Lincoln issues the **Emancipation Proclamation.**

◆ **March 16-17.** General William Averell's Union cavalry raid at Kelly's Ford on the Rappahannock River. Here the **Agallant John Pelham**, Stuart's Chief of Artillery, fell. Averell secures the roads between **Rappahannock Station and Kelly's Ford**, although he fails to destroy CSA General Fitzhugh Lee's cavalry. 3,000 men engaged; estimated 200 casualties.

March 1863. Hotchkiss Map #2

March 1863. Sneden Sketch-map, #2.

◆ **May 1-4. Battle of Chancellorsville.** Lee hands the Army of the Potomac another serious loss. Stonewall Jackson wounded (dies May 10).

◆ **June 9. Battle at Brandy Station, Va.** The largest cavalry battle on American soil takes place with 18,000 participants (Confederate under J.E.B. Stuart and Union under Alfred Pleasonton). Stuart holds his ground although the battle signals the rise and future domination of Union cavalry in the eastern theater.

June 12. Washington Roebling map memoir of the Rappahannock Station ford and fortifications.

◆ **July 1-3. Battle of Gettysburg.** General Meade compromises his victory by allowing Lee to retreat south across the Potomac.

◆ **October 14. Battle of Bristoe Station.**

October 18. Jed Hotchkiss personal sketchbook. Lee's cavalry mapmaker concentrates on roads around Rappahannock Station.

◆ **November 7. Battle of Rappahannock Station.** Meade's Army of the Potomac achieves strategic victory over General Lee's army by crossing the Rappahannock River at Kelly's Ford and Rappahannock Station. A dusk attack overran the Confederate bridgehead at Rappahannock River, capturing more than 1,600 men of Jubal Early's Division. Estimated 937 casualties, 430 at Kelly's Ford, 507 at Rappahannock Station.

◆ **November.** The Army of the Potomac goes into winter quarters around Brandy Station, with the 50th New York Engineers stationed at Rappahannock Station. Confederate forces retire south of the Rapidan River, in Orange County.

November 12. Sneden - Two plans of Battle and Field of Operations Map

◆ **November 19.** Lincoln delivers his **Gettysburg Address.**

SOURCES: Smithsonian Institution [<http://www.civilwar.si.edu/timeline>]; *Civil War: A Narrative*, by Shelby Foote; National Park Service [<http://www.nps.gov/frsp/rapp.htm>]; *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies, Washington Government Printing Office 1880-1903*; Virginia Civil War Trails: Northern Virginia Crossroads of Conflict 1861-1865.

MAPS & GRAPHICS OF RAPPAHANNOCK STATION, VA.

Blackford, William Willis. Capt. Corps Engrs., Staff Topographer for Jeb Stuart. '

Wrote: *War Years with Jeb Stuart*.

Map of route taken by scouting party under Maj. Gen. J.E.B. Stuart, Aug, 1862. Reproduced in 1891-1895 *Atlas to Accompany the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies 1861-65*, plate 23, map 3.

Forbes, Edwin. Sketch artist.

Rappahannock Station, August 23, 1862

Portfolio of sketches online in American Memory archives, Library of Congress.

Hotchkiss, Jed. C.S.A. Topographic Engineers. '

1. Map of a Portion of the Rappahannock River & Vicinity: to illustrate the operations of the Army of Northern Virginia C.S. and the Army of the Potomac U.S. from the close of the Battle of Fredericksburg, Dec. 15th, 1862 to the Battle of Chancellorsville, Sat. May 2nd, 1863.

2. Map of Fauquier Co. Virginia compiled from various sources, including a reconnaissance by Capt. J.K. Boswell, Chf. Eng. 2d C., surveys of the O.&A. And M.G. railroads, state maps, with personal reconnaissances by Jed. Hotchkiss, Act'g Top. Eng. 2nd Corps A.N.V. March 1863.

3. Personal Sketchbook 1862-1865. October 18, 1863 map of roads paralleling the Rappahannock River on the Fauquier County (north) side.

O=Sullivan, Timothy. Photographer.

Rappahannock Station series - 9 images from March 1862. Library of Congress.

Roebing, Washington. '

Map Memoir (map & commentary) June 12, 1863 Reports on Rifle pits and Earthworks thrown up at Rappah. St. and Beverly Ford. Manuscripts and Special Collections, New York State Library, Albany.

Snedden, Robert Knox. Pvt. Maps & Journals 8 2001 the Virginia Historical Society.

1. Plan of the Battle of Rappahannock Station, Va. November 7th, 1863.
2. Plan Showing Battle Ground and Cavalry Fight, March 1863, Kelly's Ford (and Rappahannock Station).
3. Plan of Battles of Kelly's Ford and Rappahannock Station, Va: both fought Novr. 7th, 1863.
4. Map of the Field of Operations, November 1863.

Young, John J., Paine, Wm. G., and others under the direction of Topl Engineers, Union Army. ' The McDowell Map, officially titled Map of Northeastern Virginia and Vicinity in Washington, issued by the Union army in 1862. Reproduced in 1891-1895 *Atlas to Accompany the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*.

' Biographical information available in McElfresh, Earl B., *Maps and Mapmakers of the Civil War*. NY: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1999.