

FORT NONSENSE



Smart's Mill/North End Mill Fortification



CivilWarTrails.org

These earthworks are the remains of Fort Nonsense, first called the Smart's Mill or North End Mill fortification. Enslaved black laborers under the supervision of 2nd Lt. William Henry Clarke, an engineer who graduated from Virginia Military Institute in 1859, constructed the works in 1861. The fort was intended to block Union forces

from advancing westward from the Chesapeake Bay through Mathews and Gloucester Counties toward the Confederate capital in Richmond. Never used as planned, the fortification became popularly known as Fort Nonsense.



2nd Lieut. William H. Clarke

Courtesy Virginia Military Institute Archives

[Form 13.]
Provision Return for Captain W. H. Clarke, Company of Virginia, for Twenty Eight days, commencing July 1st 1862 and ending July 28th P.M. 1862

POST OR STATION	RATINGS OF										REMARKS	
	Spikes	Number	Number	Number	Iron	Shoe	Iron	Shoe	Shoe	Shoe		
Smart's Mill	12	25	28	28	28	28	28	28	28	28	28	Mr. Clarke's report on the works at Smart's Mill in Mathews Co. Va.

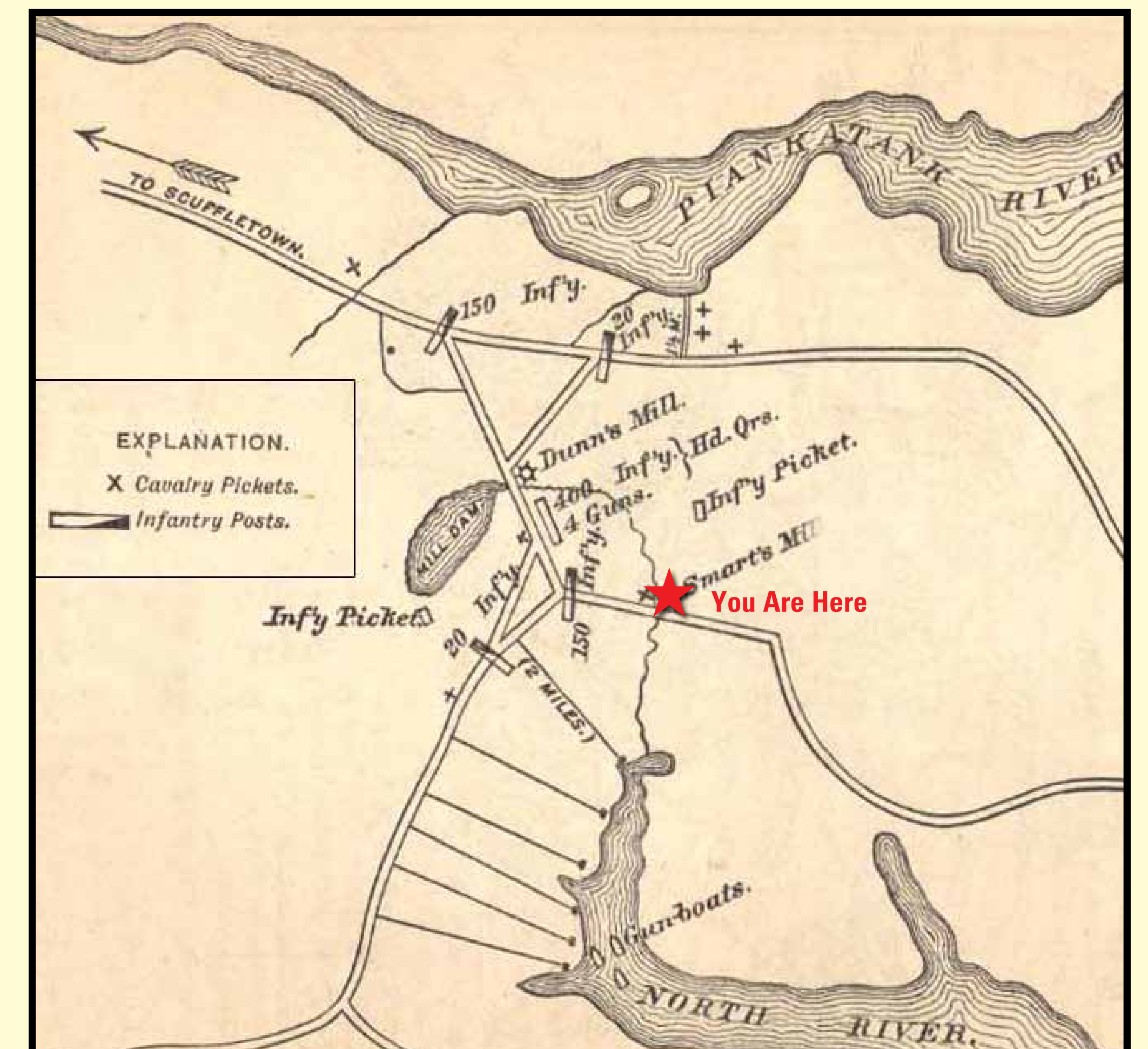
The A. C. S. will issue receipts to the above return.
J. S. Buchanan Commanding Post.
W. H. Clarke Commanding Company.

Provision Return for the men at Smart's Mill
Courtesy National Archives and Records Administration

Mathews County was important for its salt production and as a destination for Confederate blockade runners between Virginia and Maryland. In October 1863, Union Gen. Isaac J. Wistar and Lt. Cmdr. James H. Gillis led an army-navy task force to the county to eradicate Confederate supply trading and commerce raiding. Some of Wistar's troops camped here at what they called "an old Rebel breastwork."



U.S. Navy vessels pursuing a Confederate blockade runner, Harper's Weekly, Dec. 31, 1864



"Position of U.S. Forces under General Wistar, to Cover Operations of Cavalry in Mathews County, Va., October 5-9, 1863," adapted from *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies, Ser. I, Vol. 29, Pt. 1, p. 1017*

BY LAND AND BY SEA



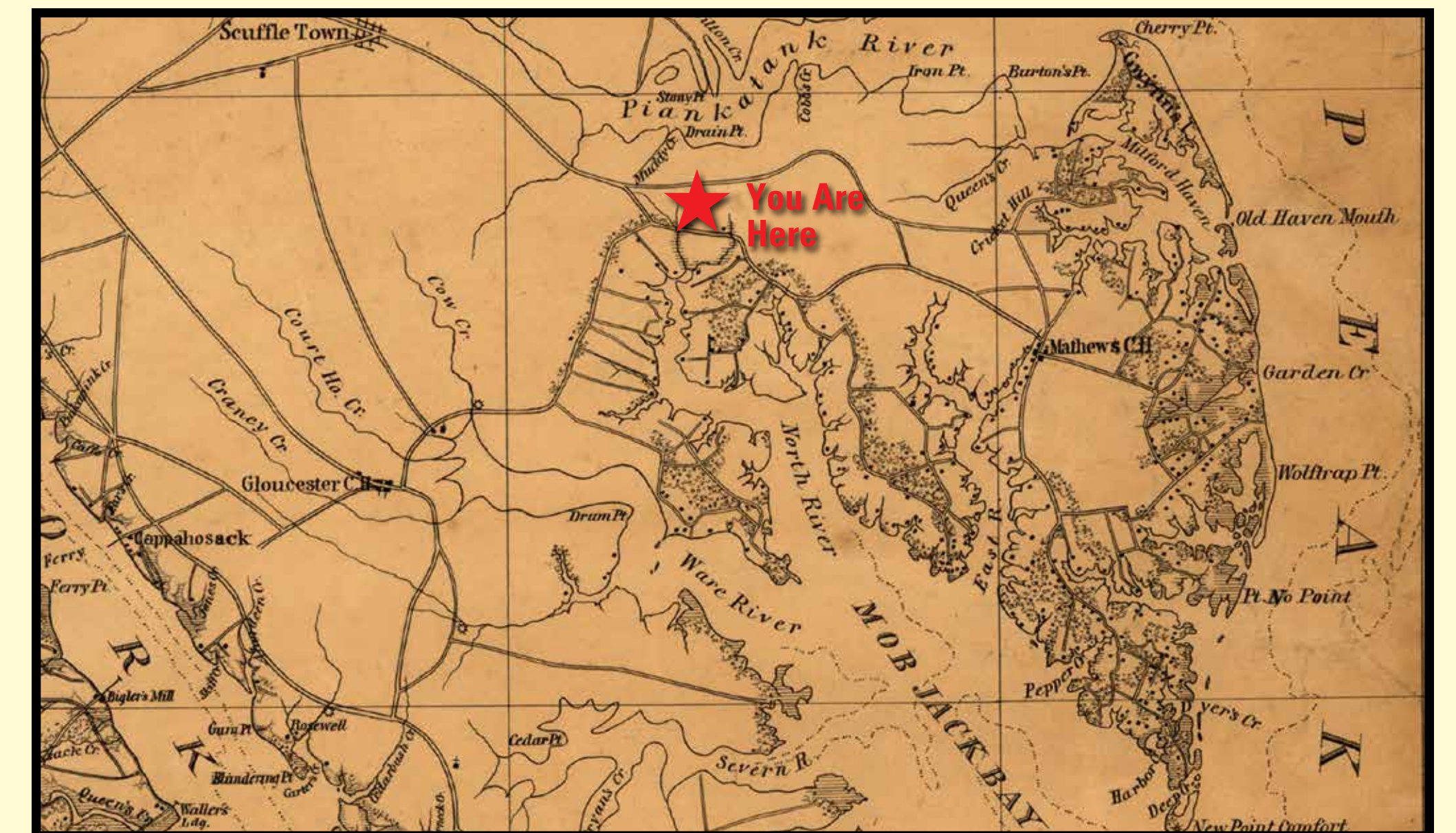
Federal Incursions in Mathews County



CivilWarTrails.org

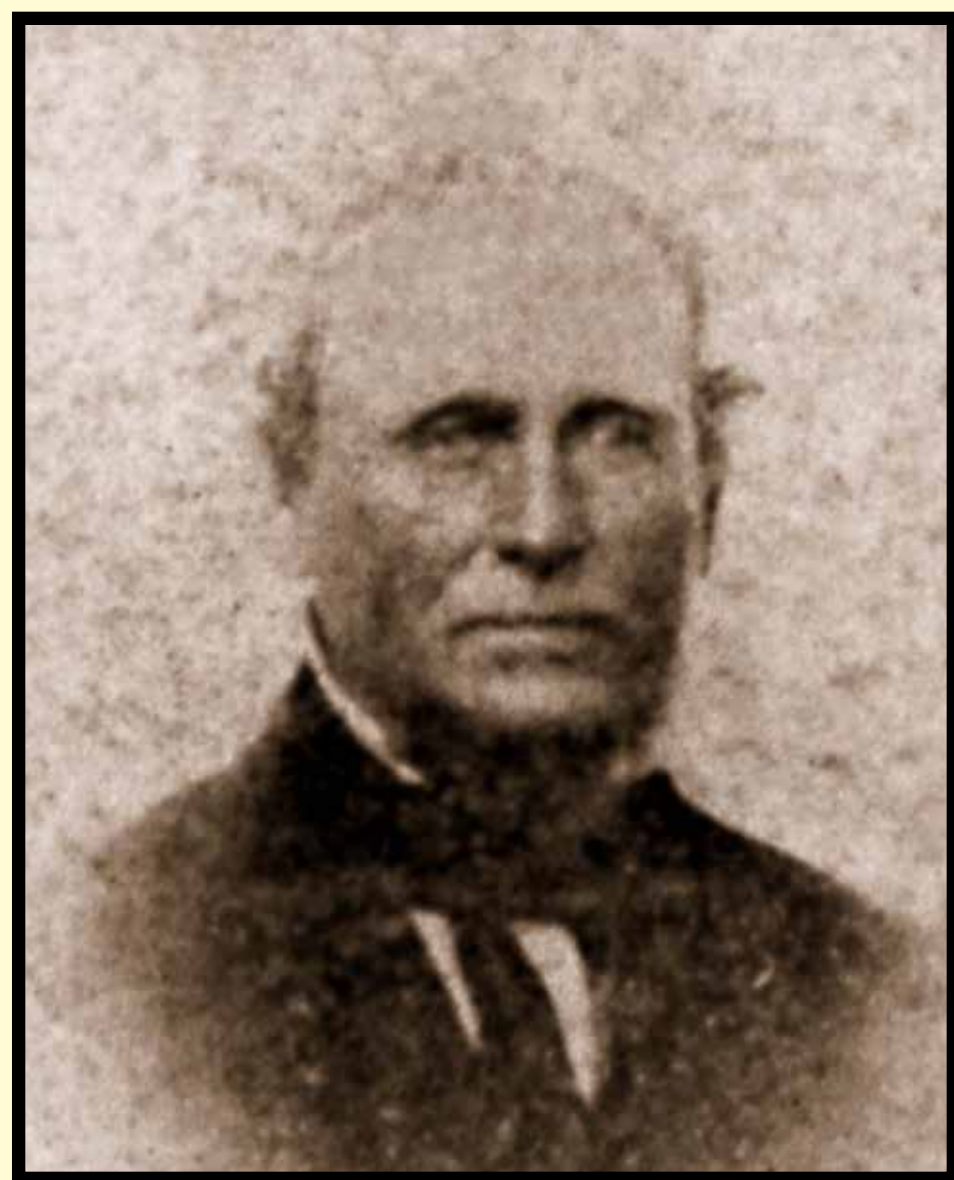
Although no major battles were fought in Mathews County, Union forces made several incursions during the war. One occurred in November 1862 to disrupt salt production and “contraband [military supplies] trade” with Maryland Confederates. It included a detachment of the 52nd Pennsylvania Infantry under Maj. John B. Conyngham as well as naval vessels under Cmdr. Foxhall A. Parker. The raiders destroyed numerous vessels and salt works. On November 25, a Federal gunboat destroyed a Confederate gunboat construction site on the North River.

Another joint army-navy incursion took place in October 1863 to thwart Confederate Navy Capt. John Taylor Wood’s and Acting Master John Yates Beall’s commerce raiding. Union Gen. Isaac Wistar led the expedition and occupied the “isthmus” of Mathews County, with pickets stationed “near an old rebel breastwork.” His command consisted of cavalry, artillery, and infantry regiments including the 4th U.S. Colored Troops. Elements of the Potomac Flotilla and the North Atlantic Blocking Squadron also took part in this campaign to eradicate Beall’s Confederate Volunteer

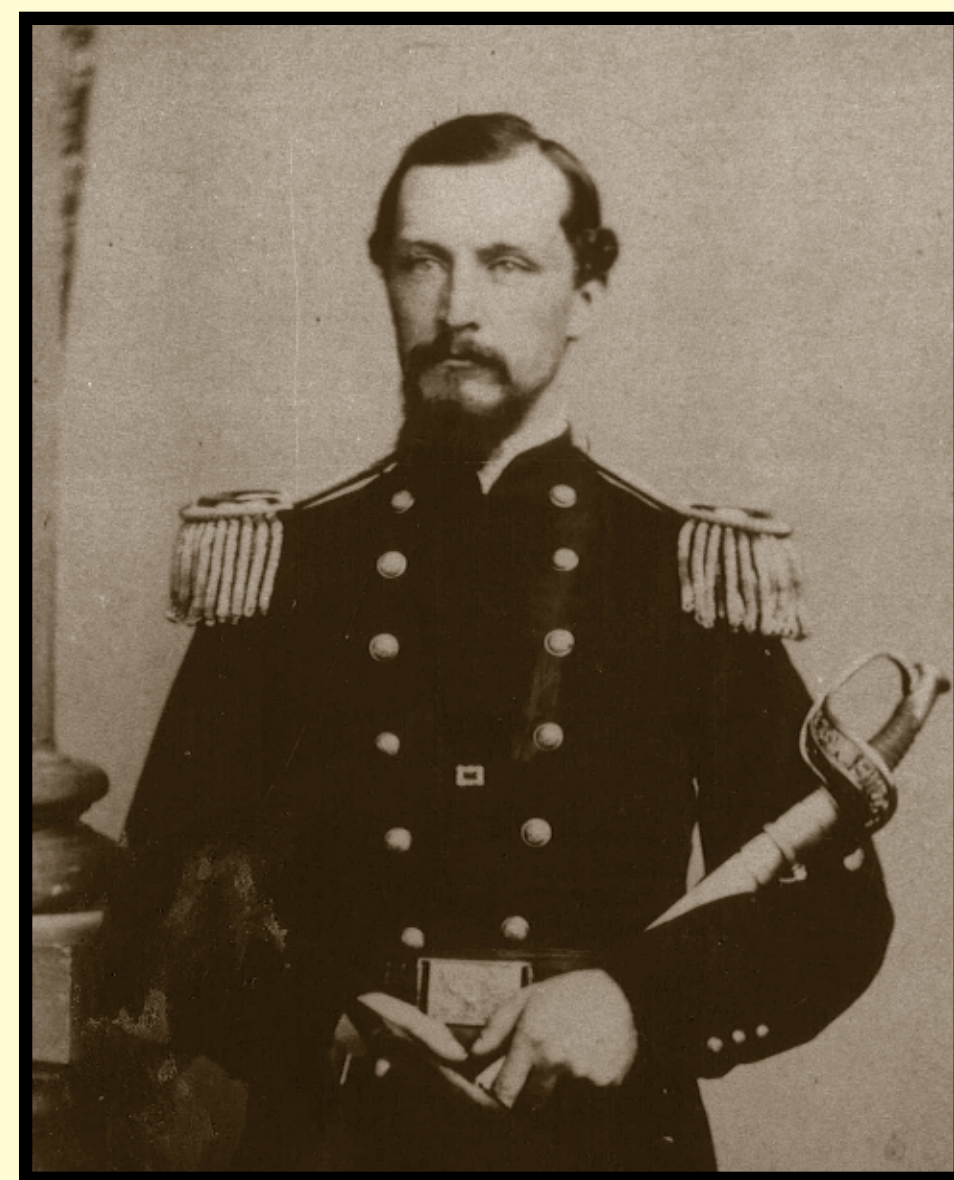


“Military Map of South-Eastern Virginia,” 1865, detail of Mathews County
Courtesy Library of Congress

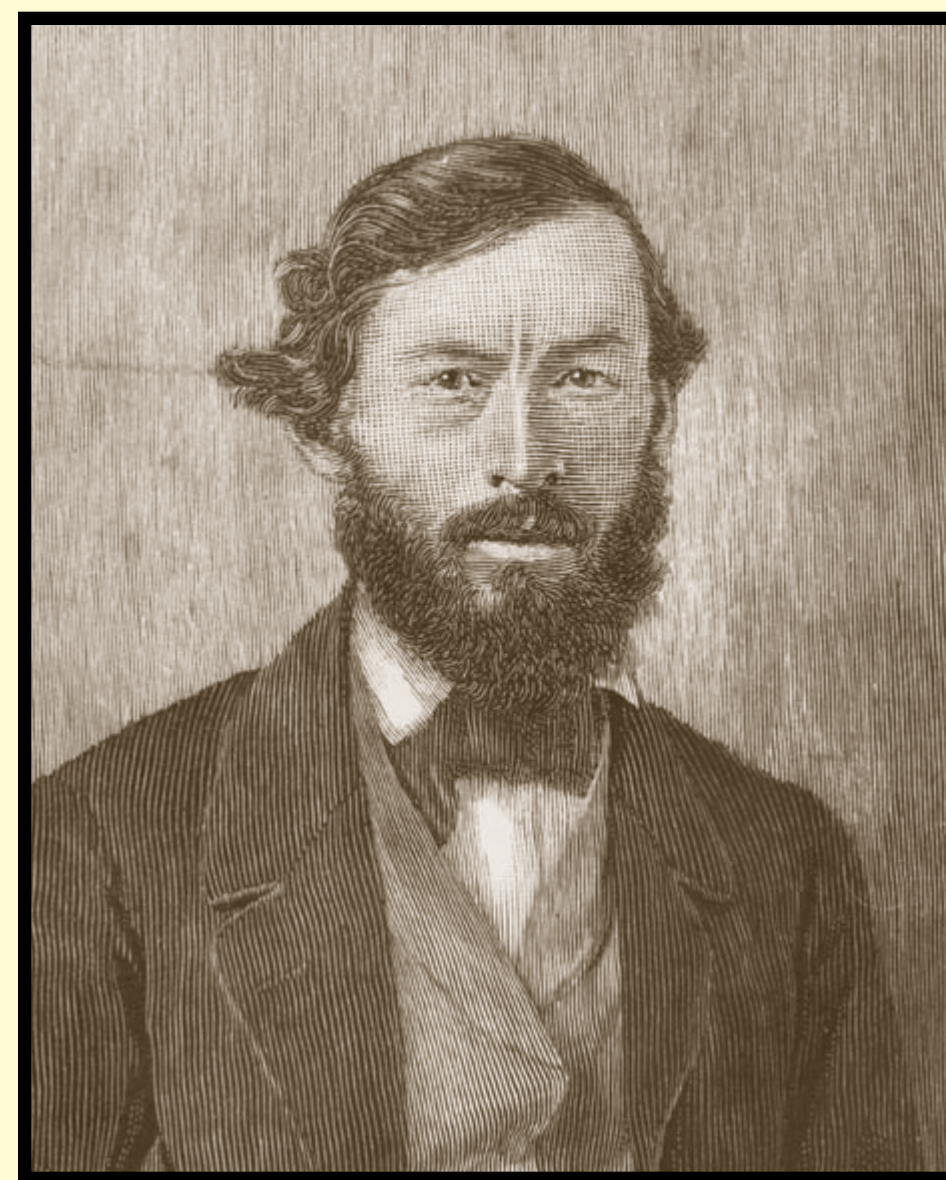
Coast Guard. As naval vessels blocked any water escape route, Wistar’s cavalry raided throughout the countryside. Although Beall escaped, Wistar declared success and reported that “about 150 boats and sloops were destroyed, 80 head of cattle captured and approximately 100 prisoners associated with blockade running were arrested.” One Union soldier was killed by elderly farmer Sands Smith II, one of the county’s most revered citizens. As Wistar reported the event, “One man was murdered by a bushwhacker named Smith, who was promptly hung, being taken in the act.”



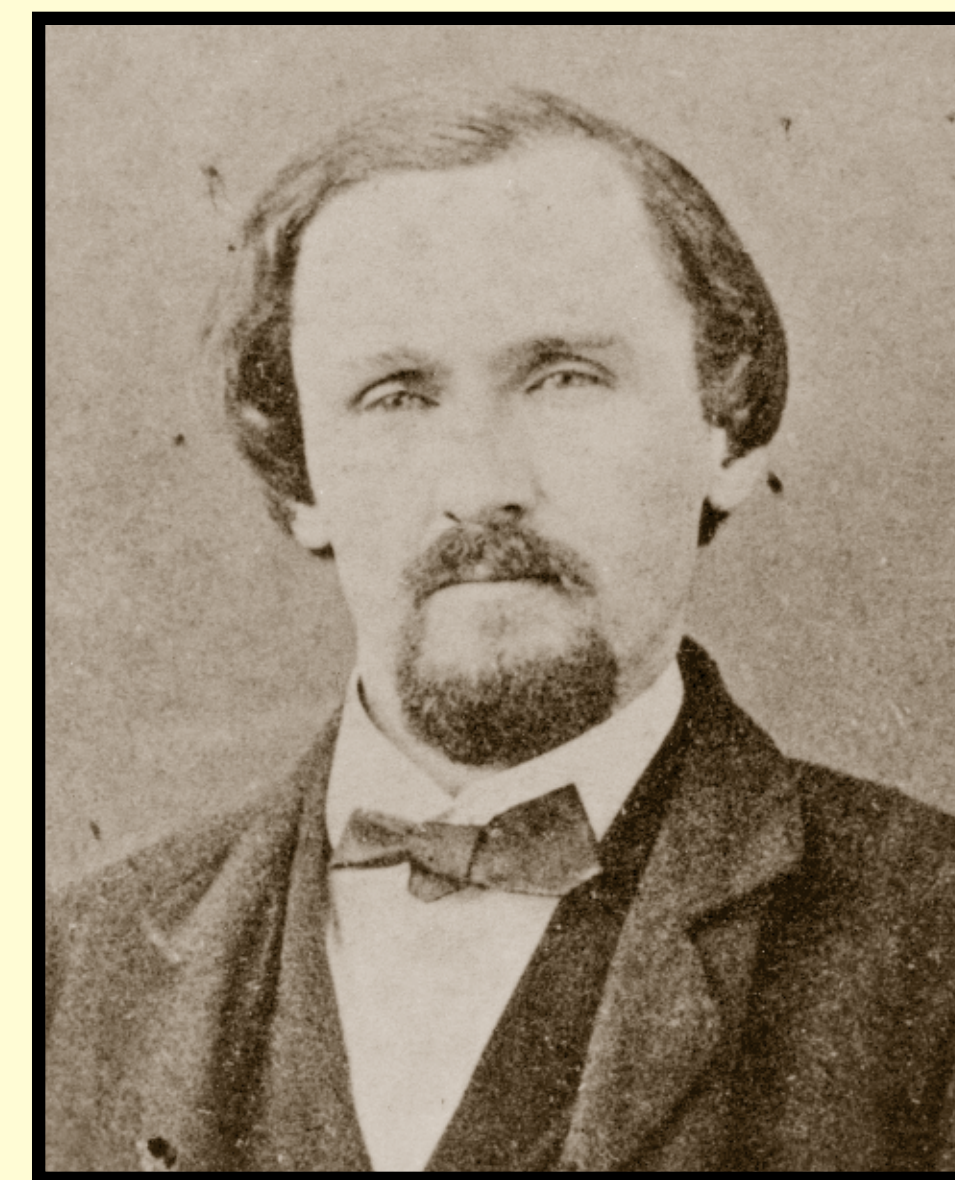
Sands Smith II – Courtesy Mathews County Historical Society



Gen. Isaac J. Wistar – Courtesy U.S. Army Military History Institute



Capt. John T. Wood
Courtesy U.S. Naval Historical Center



Acting Master John Y. Beall
Courtesy West Virginia State Archives

MATHEWS COUNTY



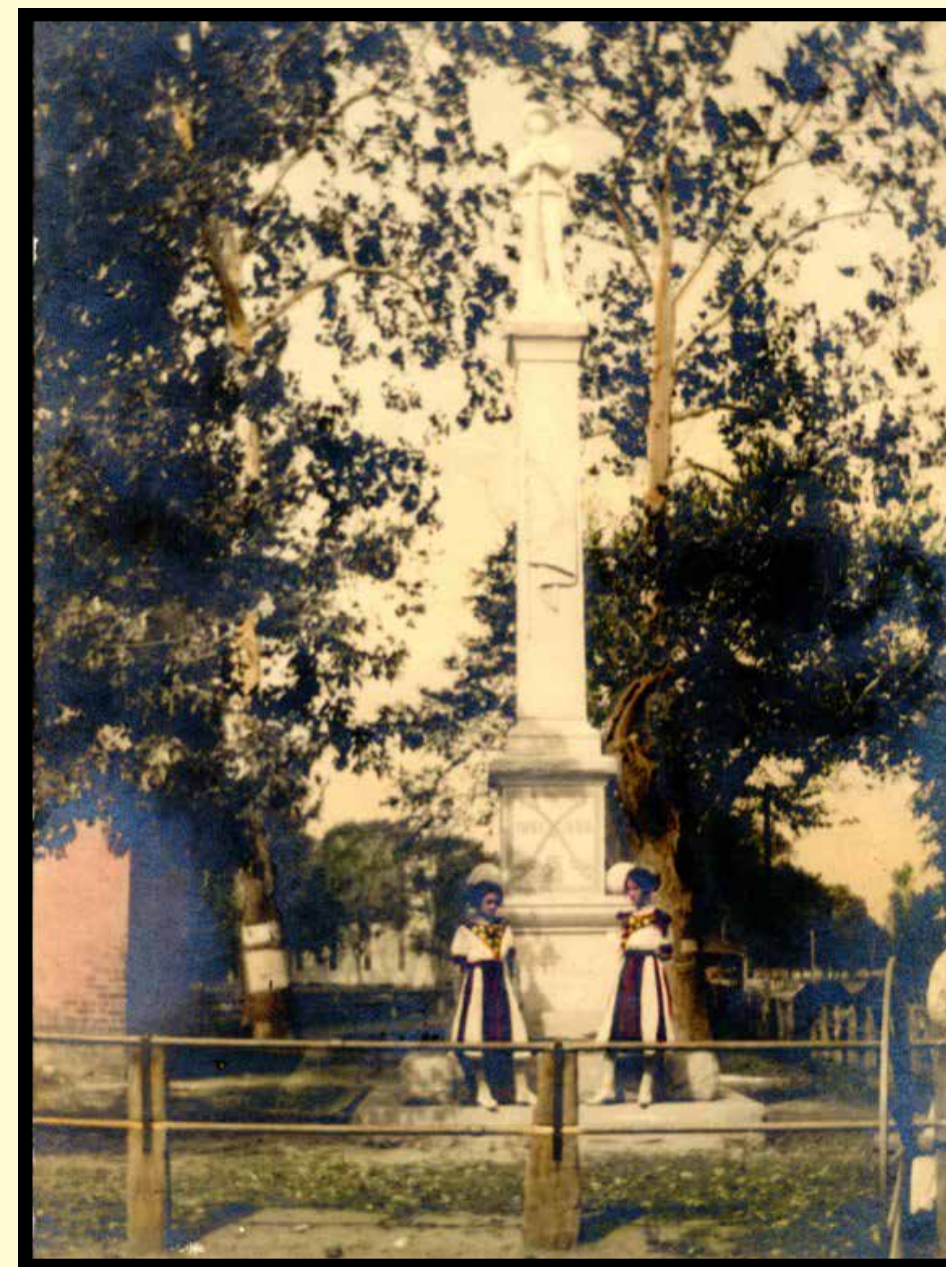
Historic Sites



CivilWarTrails.org

Mathews County has numerous historic sites that reflect a rich history dating to the first English settlement early in the 1640s. Formed in 1791 from the Kingston Parish section of Gloucester County, Mathews County is named for Gen. Thomas Mathews, then speaker of the Virginia House of Delegates.

The courthouse square in the Mathews County seat features two original jails, the courthouse, and the clerk's office. The Confederate monument was erected in 1912. Tompkins Cot-



Mathews Court House Confederate Monument, photo ca. 1912

Kingston Parish was established in 1652 and managed both ecclesiastical and civil affairs. The church, built early in the 1700s, had fallen into ruins by 1841. It was restored as Christ Church through the efforts of Capt. Sally Tompkins's sister Elizabeth. Both women are buried in the churchyard. Christ Church was rebuilt following a fire in 1904; its rector then was the Rev.



Kingston Parish Church, painting ca. 1850



tage and Thomas James Store, two of the oldest buildings in the courthouse area, are nearby.

New Point Comfort Lighthouse is the third oldest lighthouse on the Chesapeake Bay. President Thomas Jefferson commissioned it in 1804. The 55-foot-high octagonal structure sits on an island that was separated from the mainland during the hurricane of 1933.



New Point Comfort Lighthouse, photo ca. 1885

Giles Cooke, a former member of Gen. Robert E. Lee's staff during the war.

In July 1776, Gwynn's Island was the scene of the Battle of Cricket Hill, where Gen. Andrew Lewis and Virginia militia forced the royal governor, Lord Dunmore, to abandon Virginia. Gwynn's Island, as well as Williams Wharf and Fitchett's Wharf, illustrate Mathews County's shipbuilding and seafaring traditions.

All images courtesy Mathews County Historical Society

FORT NONSENSE



How was Fort Nonsense Built?



CivilWarTrails.org

The construction of an earthen fortification like Fort Nonsense required an enormous amount of labor. A clear field of fire was created as men with axes chopped down the trees in front of the work. Logs framed the fort's outline and helped to hold the

earth in place. Gabions—wicker baskets made from saplings, vines, and small trees—were piled to create the walls. The ditch outside the walls was dug to provide the earth for the parapet as well as to impede attackers. Abatis—tangled

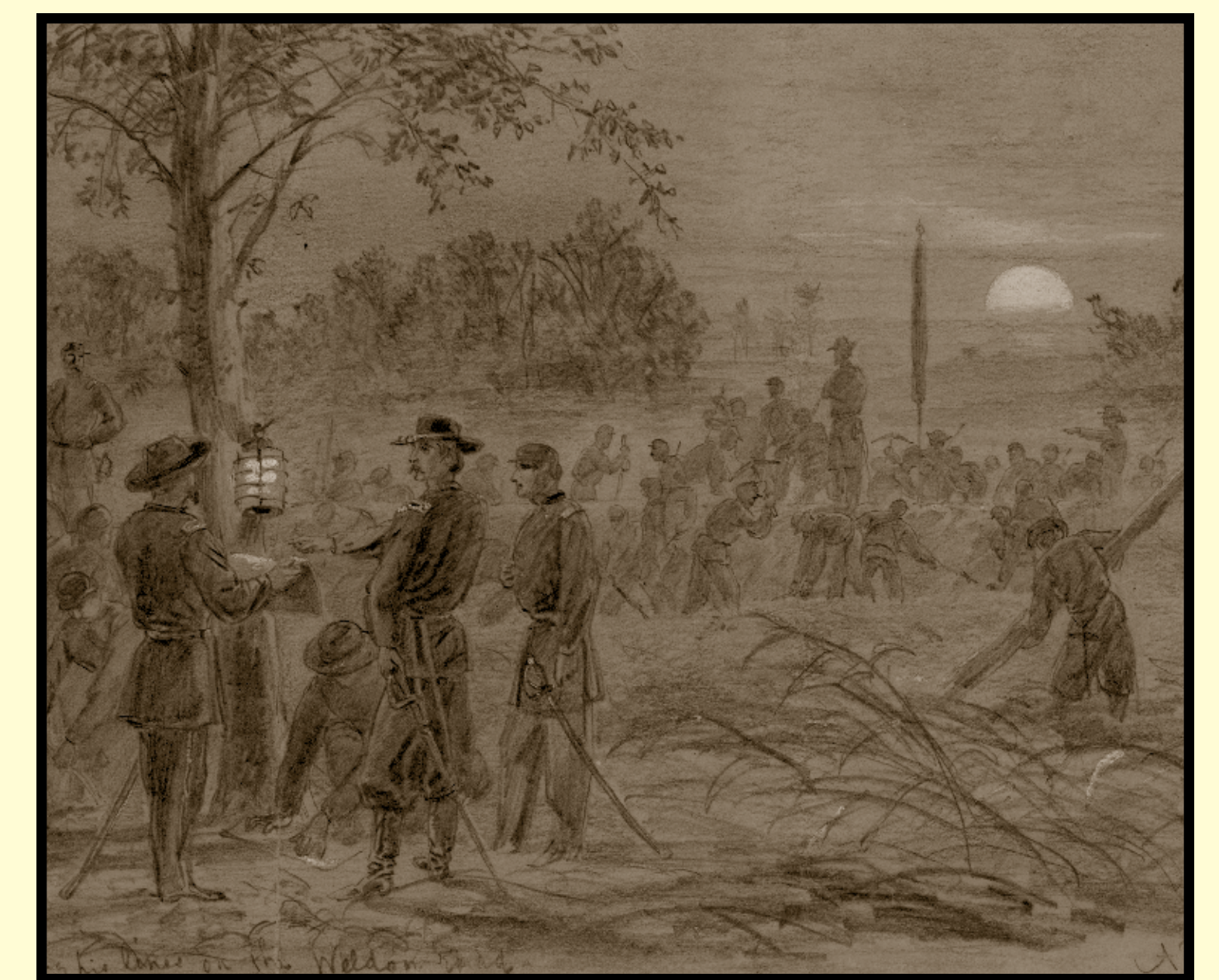


Gabions and log earthwork construction – Courtesy Library of Congress



Abatis and ditch – Courtesy Library of Congress

tree limbs with the ends sharpened and facing toward the enemy—were placed in a continuous line 60 to 80 yards in front of the earthwork to slow attackers and enable the defenders to deliver close small-arms fire from the fort. Logs cleared from the field of fire area were used inside the fort to construct cannon platforms, munitions magazines, and bombproof shelters.



Constructing earthworks by moonlight
Courtesy Library of Congress

FIELD FORTIFICATIONS



Defensive Earthworks



CivilWarTrails.org

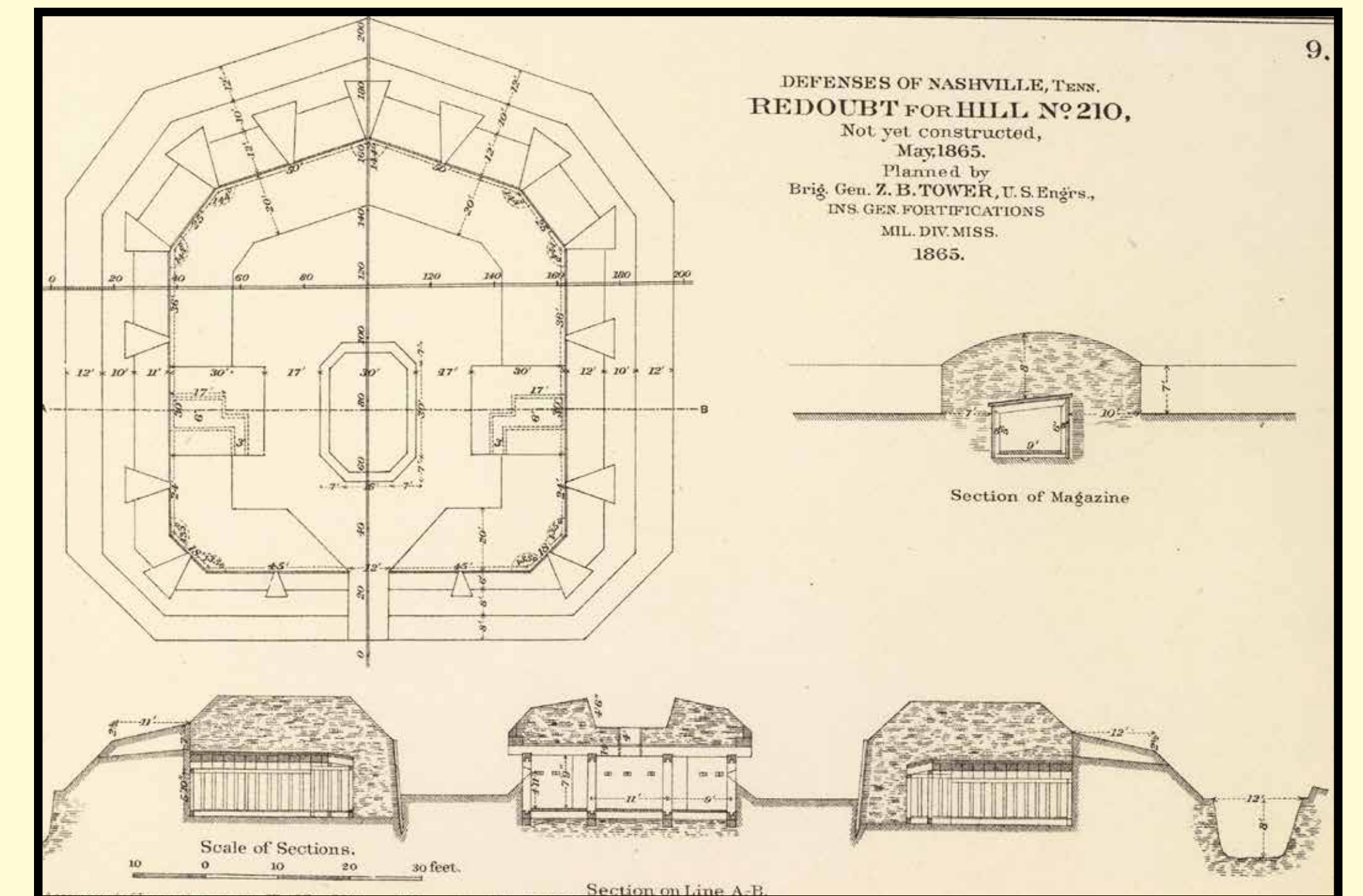
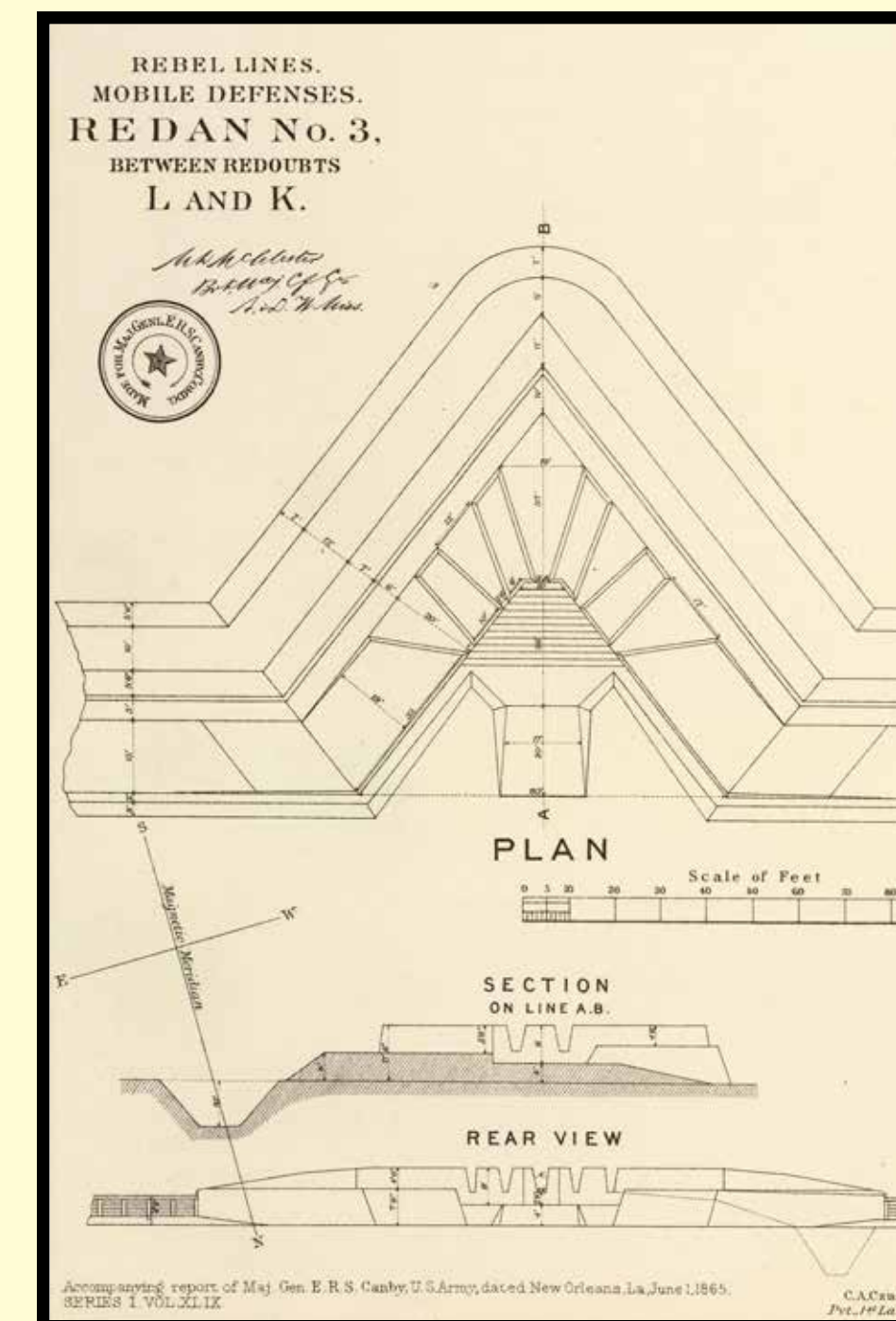
During the Civil War, many of the officers on both sides—even those who gained fame as infantry or cavalry commanders—were first trained as engineers at the United States Military Academy at West Point or the Virginia Military Institute in Lexington, Virginia. Using long-established principals, they were skilled at designing and overseeing the construction of complicated works that provided protection for those who manned them as well as fields of fire to repel attacking forces. Lt. William H. Clarke, who supervised the construction here, utilized several fortification types in designing Fort Nonsense, including the redan, the redoubt, and the lunette.

The redan, derived from the French word for “projection and salient,” consists of two faces joined to form a salient angle projecting toward the

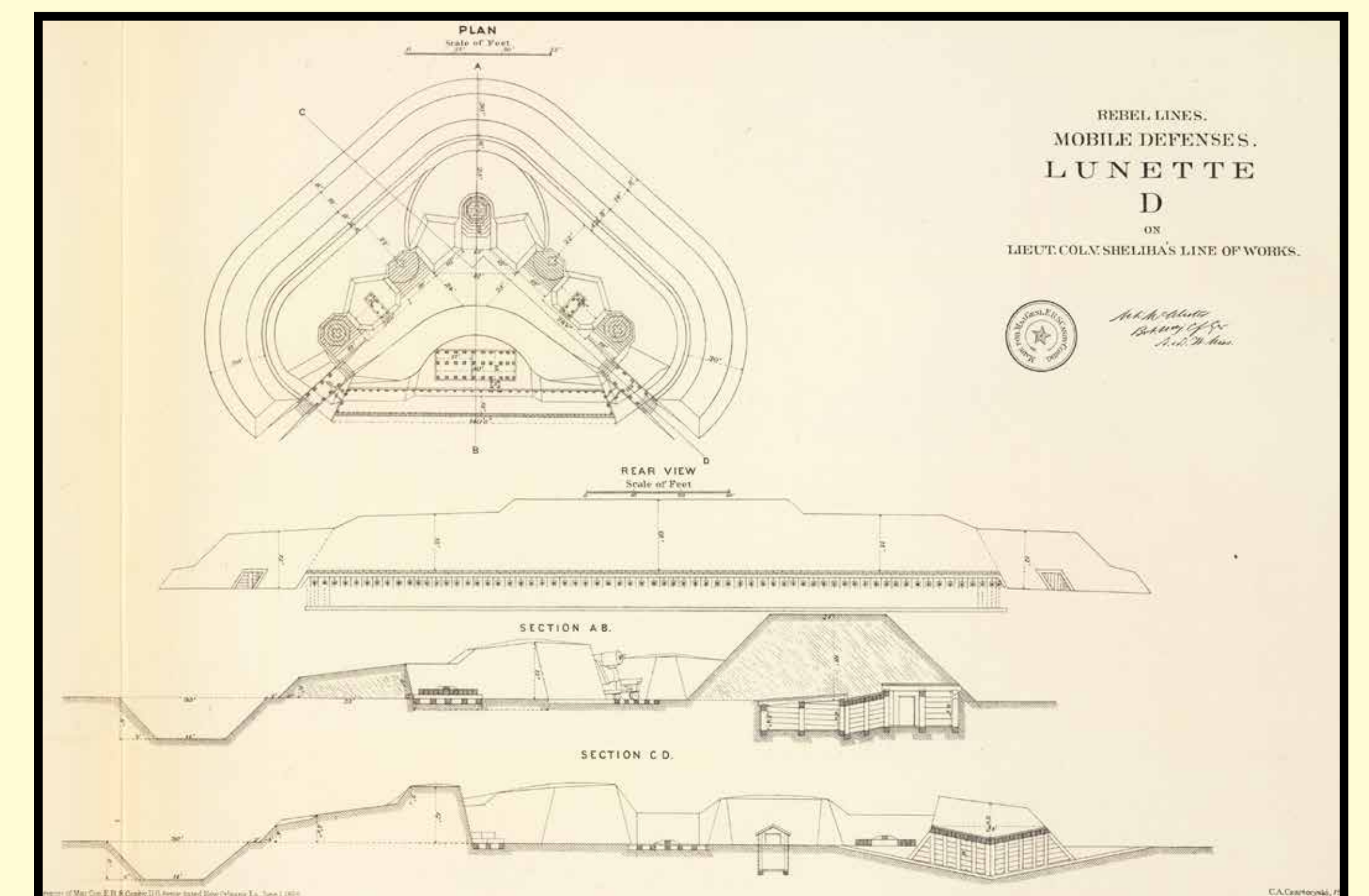
enemy and the path of an expected attack. The projecting V fortification at Fort Nonsense was designed for infantry use.

A redoubt, from the French word meaning “place of retreat,” is usually an enclosed defensive emplacement outside a larger defensive system, or an independent position. Fort Nonsense was technically a redoubt.

Derived from the French word for “little moon,” a lunette is an outer field work that forms a salient facing the enemy but is open on the side facing away from the enemy.



Redan, redoubt, and lunette, from *The Official Military Atlas of the Civil War (1891-1895)*



Confederate fortifications, Big Bethel, *Harper's Weekly*, Apr. 26, 1862

FORT NONSENSE



Artillery Position



CivilWarTrails.org

Fort Nonsense today consists of two sections of earthworks divided by a road trace. Archaeological evidence suggests that the fort's parapet extended across present-day Routes 3 and 14 to reach the existing natural obstacles. The northerly-facing section is an infantry redan, and the southerly work is a continuous parapet with two cannon emplacements within a redan. The existing road trace that separates Fort Nonsense's two components could be considered the fort's sally port.

The fortification is a continuous line of field works. It is primarily a breastwork, which was designed to allow soldiers to stand or lean against

the interior slope of the parapet to fire at attacking troops. The exterior wall absorbed most of the incoming fire.

Since only a portion of the original fort remains, it appears that it was constructed in the style of a lunette with its angles anchored on natural obstacles.



Breastworks such as these protected the soldiers, who stood upright against the wall and fired over the parapet. – *Courtesy Library of Congress*



Artillery pieces on platforms – *Courtesy Library of Congress*

Two gun platforms are located at the point of the salient. The cannons' field of fire was centered on the road from Mathews Court House. The infantry redan was constructed to guard the gun platforms' curtain wall and produce a crossing column of fire to help protect the position from an assault.

CIVIL WAR IN MATHEWS COUNTY



Confederate Units and Leaders



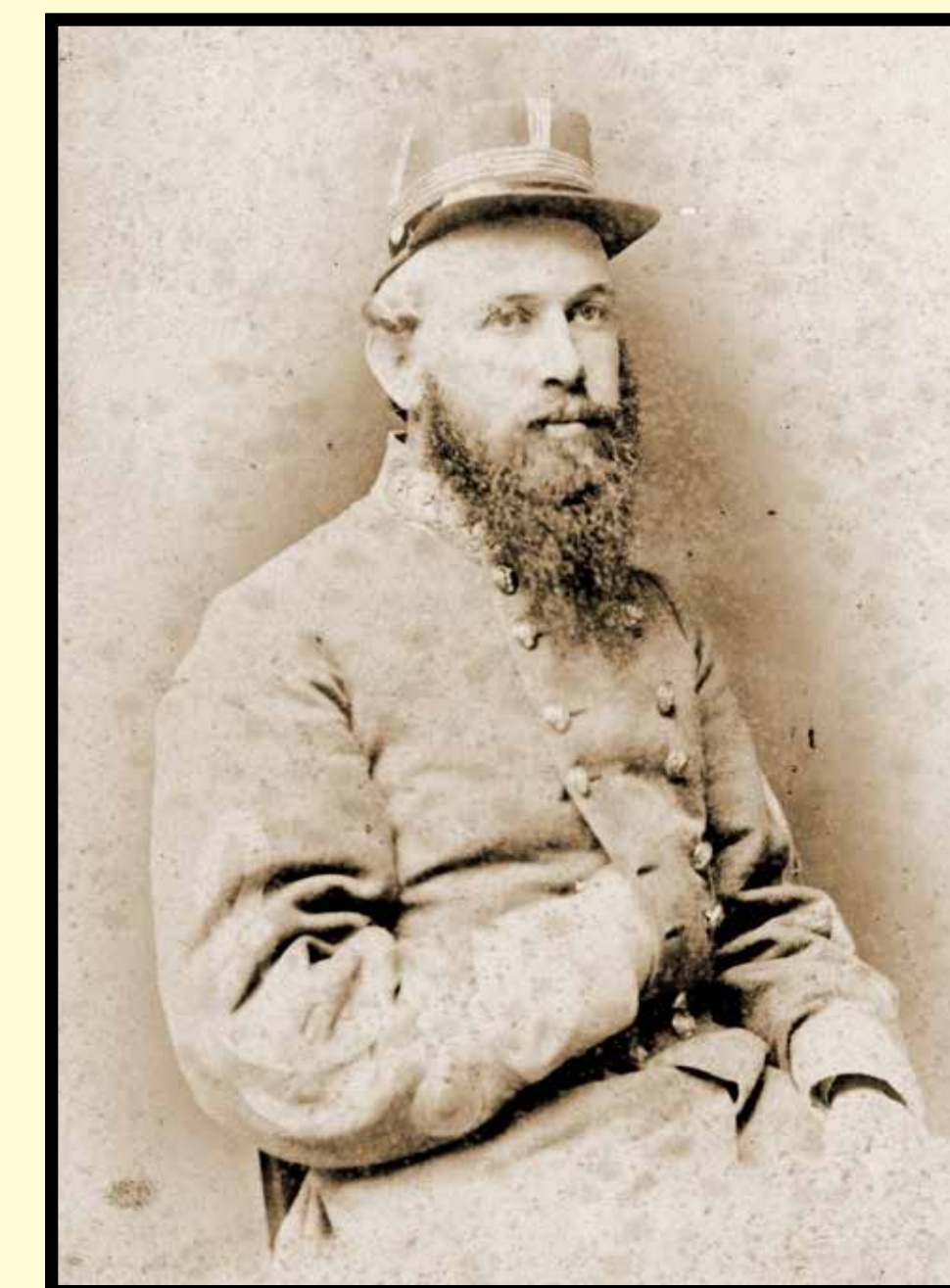
CivilWarTrails.org

Fort Nonsense is a conspicuous reminder of Mathews County's Civil War history. When war broke out, men between the ages of 21 and 45 were mustered for service in the 61st Virginia Militia Regiment. Company H became known as the Mathews Light Artillery. This unit, commanded by Capt. Andrew Armistead, was assigned to Starke's Battery on the Piankatank River. Company E, under Capt. Robert E. Hudgins, was mustered on October 31, 1861,



Last Mathews Confederate veterans, March 31, 1931. Top left to right: Elkanah Diggs and William S. Burroughs. Front left to right: John A. Lewis, Walter R. Stoakes, Major Giles B. Cooke, and John Wesley Minter. – Courtesy Mathews County Historical Society

and was sent to Gloucester Point. Both units disbanded when the Confederates abandoned Gloucester Point on May 4, 1862. Many other Mathews County men served in the 5th Virginia Cavalry, the 26th Virginia Volunteer Infantry, and the Confederate Navy.



Gen. James Henry Lane
Courtesy VMI Archives



Capt. Sally Louisa Tompkins
Courtesy Virginia Historical Society

Two Mathews County natives rose to prominence during the war. James Henry Lane (1833–1907) was born at Mathews Court House. Upon graduation from Virginia Military Institute and the University of Virginia, he taught mathematics and tactics at VMI. After leading North Carolina regiments, Lane was promoted to brigadier general in 1862. His brigade saw action from Fredericksburg to Appomattox.

Sally Louisa Tompkins (1833–1916) of Mathews County was known as the “Angel of the Confederacy.” She operated Robertson Hospital in Richmond, Va., from July 1861 until the end of the war. Tompkins, who was the only woman to hold a position as a commissioned officer in the Confederate army, was appointed captain of cavalry on September 9, 1861.

CIVIL WAR IN MATHEWS COUNTY



Union African American Sailors

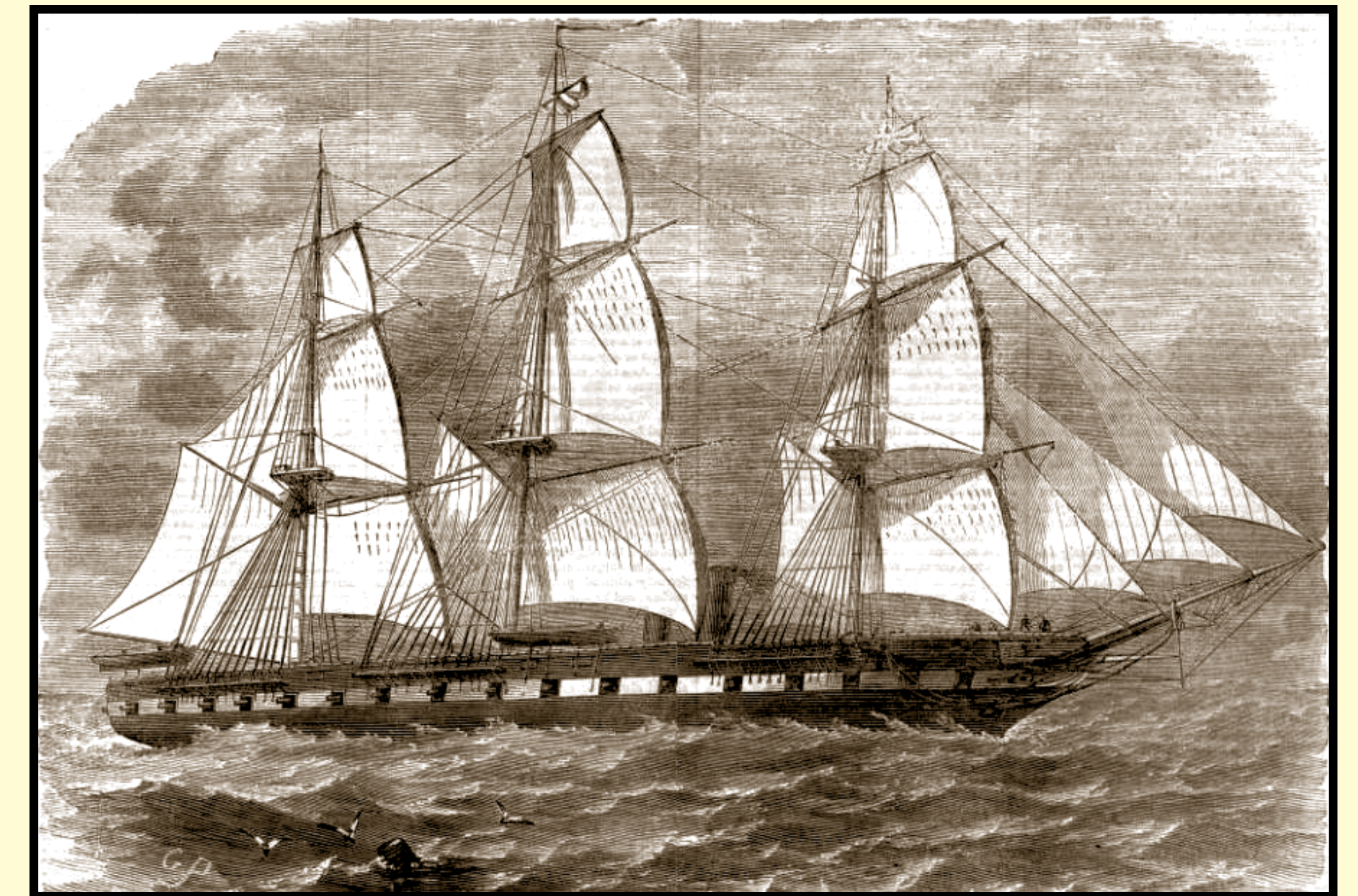


Sailors on deck of USS Arago off Charleston, S.C. -Courtesy Library of Congress

The U.S. Navy's longstanding tradition of recruiting black sailors enabled several runaways from Mathews County to enlist aboard Potomac Flotilla and North Atlantic Blockading Squadron warships. On January 30, 1862, the logbook of USS *Young Rover* noted the arrival of five Mathews County contrabands (escaped slaves), including John and Washington Diggs, Aleck Phillips (Billups), and Joe Williams. *Young Rover* picked up five more contrabands—George Williams, Humphrey Brooks, and brothers Richard, William, and



USS Arago - Courtesy National Archives & Records Administration



USS Minnesota, from Harper's Weekly

Daniel Brooks—on March 1. The Brooks brothers shipped aboard the frigate USS *Minnesota* on May 17. Daniel Brooks at first worked as a coal heaver on USCS *Arago*, a U.S. Coast Survey ship chartered by the government to help track CSS *Virginia* (formerly USS *Merrimack*) in 1862. Capt. G. J. H. Van Brunt, commander of *Minnesota*, welcomed contrabands into the crew. Van Brunt believed that these men served energetically and they “evidently felt that they were working at the deliverance of their race.”