

# Landmark Nomination Report

## Jefferson County Historic Landmarks Commission

### **Battle of Shepherdstown at Boteler's Cement Mill**

#### **Physical Description:**

The site of the Battle of Shepherdstown at Boteler's Cement Mill is located in eastern Jefferson County, West Virginia, a half mile below Shepherdstown. The property, owned by the Jefferson County Historic Landmarks Commission, is bisected by River Road and adjoins the Potomac River.

#### **Historic Description:**

Virginia's secession from the Union drew the line of division along the banks of the Potomac River. The river served as a natural barrier between Union North and Confederate South. However, though most bridges were burned early in the war, the several river fords above Great Falls served both sides in their forays into enemy territory. By August 1861, various Union regiments guarded the river fords on the Maryland side. At that time the 13<sup>th</sup> Regiment Massachusetts Volunteers covered the "Shepherdstown Ford," the old Packhorse Ford by then also commonly known as Boteler's or Blackford's Ford. Private James Ramsey, Co. E, of the 13<sup>th</sup> Regt., was stationed at the ford on the night of August 18<sup>th</sup>, 1861. In a letter home written later in October, Ramsey recalled the destruction of the Potomac Mills:

While we were at Sheppardstown [sic] we were in a dangerous position which we then did not realize, our camp was situated on a hill within rifle range of the rebels, on their side of the river they had thick foliage besides a four story factory which some of our company burnt, as a good place of protection against our firing they could pick off our guard without danger from our rifles.

Potomac Mills owner, Alexander Boteler, by then a Colonel in the Confederate army and a representative in the Confederate legislature, was specifically targeted when both his home and the Potomac Mills were burned during the same Union raid.

Throughout the first year of the Civil War, Maryland's commitment to the Union was fragile, with a divided legislature and her fathers, sons, and brothers joining the fight in one or the other opposing army. Still, the majority of Marylanders professed their loyalty to the Union, though perhaps sympathetic to the southern cause. And with the nation's capital city of Washington located within the state's borders, Federal forces aimed to keep the state within the Union. Confederate General Robert E. Lee's Maryland Campaign in the late summer of 1862 sought to test the waters of rebellion in Maryland, and perhaps ease the strain of near constant fighting in Virginia. By bringing the war into Northern territory, he hoped to force a negotiated peace through public pressure on Congress.

On September 4, 1862, Lee's Army of Northern Virginia crossed the Potomac River at White's Ford, entering Maryland in Montgomery County and turning north. At Frederick, General Lee hatched his plan in Special Order No. 191, to divide his army between Harpers Ferry, Boonsboro, and Hagerstown where they were to reunite and head north into Pennsylvania. A mislaid copy of the order was later found in the field by a Union soldier and delivered to General McClellan, newly assigned commander of the Union Army of the Potomac. Knowing that Lee's

army was dangerously divided, McClellan took chase catching up with the Confederate rear guard stationed near Boonsboro at South Mountain on the morning of September 14<sup>th</sup>. The small contingent of Confederates held the three South Mountain gaps throughout the day, blocking the Union army from passage until Harpers Ferry surrendered and the Confederate forces reunited. But instead of reuniting at Hagerstown as planned, they regrouped on the west bank of the Antietam Creek, occupying the rural Maryland town of Sharpsburg with their backs to the Potomac River. Lee's grossly outnumbered force of approximately 80,000 men faced McClellan's approaching army of 125,000 with only the Antietam Creek and the ripened cornfields and orchards of the Sharpsburg area farms between them.

The battle that raged throughout the day on September 17<sup>th</sup>, 1862, called the Battle of Antietam in the North and the Battle of Sharpsburg in the South, left over 23,000 men killed, wounded or missing. The day ended with little ground actually lost by Lee's Confederates. But the overwhelming numbers of men still available to Union General McClellan left Lee little choice but to retreat back across the Potomac River on September 18<sup>th</sup> (Figure 9). On September 19<sup>th</sup>, General McClellan sent a dispatch to Maj. General Halleck in Washington, D.C.:  
Pleasanton is driving the enemy across the river. Our victory was complete. The enemy is driven back into Virginia. Maryland and Pennsylvania are now safe.  
McClellan's dispatch, though ultimately true, would prove to be premature.

The nearby Packhorse (Boteler's) Ford of the Potomac River served as a conduit, first bringing General A. P. Hill's Confederate troops marching from Harpers Ferry to join the fight at Antietam (Sharpsburg), then for the Confederate retreat back to Virginia following the battle and the Union pursuit. The final battle of the Maryland Campaign occurred on the Virginia side of the river crossing, around the burned-out ruins of the Potomac Mills, the quarry cliffs above, and along the old "Waggon Road" by then known locally as Trough Road. (Figure 10)

On the morning of September 19<sup>th</sup>, Union artillery located on the Maryland hillside overlooking the Potomac River began pounding the Virginia bank in preparation for the Union crossing. Confederate General Lee's instruction to his small force at the river was to "guard the fords" at least until night and then prepare the infantry "to join their respective divisions on the march tomorrow." The intended march was to head toward the Valley Road (today's Route 11) at Martinsburg and to re-cross the Potomac at Williamsport, continuing on toward Pennsylvania. It seems neither Lee nor McClellan anticipated the battle about to unfold around Alexander Boteler's ruined mill.

Just at sundown on the evening of September 19<sup>th</sup>, as the Federal batteries renewed their pounding fire, a group of 50 volunteer sharpshooters supported by the 4<sup>th</sup> Michigan waded into the river at the Packhorse Ford. The shadows of the small Union force crossing the river under the dark of the evening appeared to the Confederate artillerymen on the bluff like "a million" men and their retreat began. The abandoned Confederate artillery on the Virginia side was easily captured. On the morning of the 20<sup>th</sup>, lulled by the success of the night prior, the unsuspecting men of the Union 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade, including the 118<sup>th</sup> Pennsylvania Volunteer Corn Exchange Regiment, "splashed and paddled" across the Packhorse Ford to the Virginia side. They deployed up the Charlestown Road (Trough Road) and down the river road (today's River Road) by the mill ruin. Then they followed a path up the hill to the fields of the Osbourn farm on the bluffs. There the forces of General Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson surprised the Union troops.

Despite renewed and reportedly vicious shelling from the Maryland side, the Confederate line relentlessly advanced on the Union force formed above the quarry cliffs.

Union General Fitz John Porter arrived on the Maryland riverbank to view the unfolding drama. Surprised by the extent of the reconnaissance-turned-battle, Porter recalled: Seeing the small force of infantry on the opposite bank (two brigades of Sykes's and part of one of Morell's), and the impossibility of getting over and forming sufficient force in time to meet the attack, I ordered all to withdraw and take shelter within the canal.

Though the re-crossing began relatively orderly, as the columns collapsed into retreat they found themselves under fire from the Confederates behind them and from friendly fire in front. In the confusion, the green troops of the 118<sup>th</sup> Pa. Corn Exchange were at the rear and still in line of battle, not having received the order to withdraw.

Alone on the cliff above Boteler's mill ruins, the Corn Exchange bravely stood their ground until they were completely overrun by Confederate troops. Their wild retreat down the ravine path over which they had initially arrived proved to be a death trap as rebel guns fired on them from above. Others found themselves at the edge of the cliff, falling to their deaths. Sharpsburg resident Jacob Miller, a southern sympathizer, described what he saw as he watched the battle from his farm on the Maryland side of the river:

...at the cement quarry they ["the Yankees"] made no halt but tumbled over into the pit. Some broke their arms some their legs some their necks and some knocked out their brains but nearly all that went over were killed they were piled on top of each other eight or ten feet high... Those that did make it to the river alive faced the barrage of gun and artillery fire coming from above and from across the river. Private Joseph Meehan slid down the bluff, "and reaching the road at the bottom...ran a short distance till I came to three archways in the hill. Into the first of these I got for protection." Meehan was not alone in his limekiln refuge. Remarkably, a relatively large number of men reached the river's edge, only to face the river crossing: From his position in the kilns, Joseph Meehan had a close-up view of the chaos near the dam: "From our retreat we witnessed a scene of great excitement. Men were trying to get across the river, the bullets dropping about them like hail. One or two were swimming, as being a safer plan. A breakwater ran across the river near us, and it contained many dead and wounded men." Captain Frank Donaldson recalled: "I stood near the sluice way which intervened between the dam proper and the riverbank, seeing to the passage of the same by such of my company willing to venture across, and with aching heart witnessed the utter demoralization and rout of this fine body of men, who, beaten, dismayed, wild with fright, all order and discipline gone, were rushing headlong toward the dam, across which alone lay safety and escape."

The Battle of Shepherdstown, also known as the Battle of the Cement Mill, ended September 20<sup>th</sup> with 160 dead – 64 Confederate and 96 Union, of which 80 were from the 118<sup>th</sup> Pa. Corn Exchange Regiment. Immediately following the bloody Battle of Antietam this number seemed small, though the scenes were horrific and the results of the battle were significant. General McClellan came away believing it nearly impossible to follow Lee into Virginia; instead keeping his army encamped around Sharpsburg and along the Potomac through October 1862. In October President Lincoln replaced McClellan with General Burnside as head of the Army of the Potomac.

In the end, General Lee found no sentiment for rebellion in Maryland and did not “anticipate any general rising of the people in our behalf.” By the end of September 1862 Lee found his army to be in such a poor condition as to prevent his plan to “threaten a passage into Maryland,” noting in his letter to Confederacy President Jefferson Davis:

I would not hesitate to make it even with our diminished numbers, did the army exhibit its former temper and condition; but, as far as I am able to judge, the hazard would be great and a reverse disastrous. I am, therefore, led to pause.

The Confederate army did not cross again into Maryland bringing the war to the North until the summer of 1863. Reaching as far as Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, their failure there proved to be the last large invasion from the South. A smaller crossing occurred in July of 1864 when Confederate General Jubal Early led a force of approximately 15,000 in an attack on Washington D.C. in an effort to draw Grant’s Union troops away from Richmond. Early’s plan was foiled when his force was delayed at the Monocacy River crossing near Frederick by 6,000 Federal troops under the command of General Lew Wallace. Smaller incursions for supplies and ransom continued throughout the war, but the Confederate hope that Maryland would join the cause died with the end of the Maryland Campaign on the south bank of the Potomac River by the ruins of the Potomac Mills.

### **Nomination Criteria:**

The JCHLC nominates this site under Criteria A for inclusion on the list of registered county landmarks. Criteria A states that a site may be nominated if, in the opinion of the Landmarks Commission, it is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history. The property’s owner, Jefferson County Historic Landmarks Commission, has voted to list the Potomac Mills site as a Jefferson County Historic Landmark.

### **Nomination Action:**

The JCHLC voted unanimously to add the Battle of Shepherdstown at Boteler’s Cement Mill site, under Criteria A, to the rolls of registered Jefferson County Historic Landmarks on September 19, 2012.