

## **Up, Up and Away Balloons in the Civil War**

**By Irma Clifton**

I was reading an article last week that said by the time Abraham Lincoln took the oath of office as the President of the United States of America on March 4, 1861, six states had already seceded from the Union; all from the south, although Virginia was not among them. It was not until the bombardment of Fort Sumter and Lincoln's call for troops in April of 1861 that Virginia left the Union and joined the Confederacy. And although some of the bloodiest battles of the war were fought on Virginia soil, southeastern Fairfax County only saw scattered action. However, one of the more colorful and swashbuckling events that did take place in our area was the launching of hot air balloons at Pohick Church over a three-day period in March of 1862. By today's standards this "spy in the sky" activity seems rather primitive, but looking back at the knowledge and expertise of the day it can be considered a novel undertaking.

Early in the war, Secretary of the Treasury Salmon P. Chase arranged a meeting between President Lincoln and Professor Thaddeus S. C. Lowe so Lowe could demonstrate his ideas regarding the use of balloons for reconnaissance and as a base to send telegraph messages to the battlefield. Impressed with Lowe's mastery of technology, Lincoln authorized the establishment of the Balloon Corps under the supervision of the Union's Bureau of Topographical Engineers.

As an adult, Thaddeus S. C. Lowe was keenly interested in chemistry, meteorology, and aeronautics. He was born in 1832 in New Hampshire and spent his early years on the family farm. At the age of eleven Lowe struck out on his own making his way to Portland, Maine, the nearest big city. It was during this trip that he heard a fictional account of the great airship Victoria making an Atlantic crossing. That event changed his life and the aeronaut in Lowe was headed for greater heights from then on.

After his meeting with President Lincoln Lowe received funding in August of 1861 to build the first U. S. balloon designed for military use. The next month he ascended to a height of 1,000 feet and was able to telegraph accurate information on Confederate troops camped near Falls Church. Shortly thereafter, Secretary of War Simon Cameron ordered Lowe to build six more balloons.

Lowe made many excursions in Northern Virginia accompanied by military men who engaged in mapping the area and providing information on Confederate encampments and troop movements. One incident that is of particular interest is the launch of a reconnaissance balloon over the yard at Pohick Church in March of 1862. Soaring 1,000-2,000 feet above the church Lowe reported in a dispatch to General Heintzelman, seeing camp-fires on the Occoquan. On March 7th, an observer in the balloon was able to see that the Confederate troops had left the town of Occoquan. According to a diary account by a Pvt. Sneden related in the church history, "Balloons are now used frequently at Pohick Church...A gas wagon is attached to the balloon with which the balloon is only one half or one third inflated, then it rises 1,000 feet or more, and is held on the ground by two or three long ropes by a lot of soldiers who are detailed for the purpose."

Lowe was in constant danger and on one occasion narrowly missed disaster when he was fired upon by Confederate troops while making ascension. His Balloon Corps provided tactical information during the siege of Yorktown, and at Fredericksburg, and in the battle at Fair Oaks information provided by a balloon proved crucial to the Union victory.

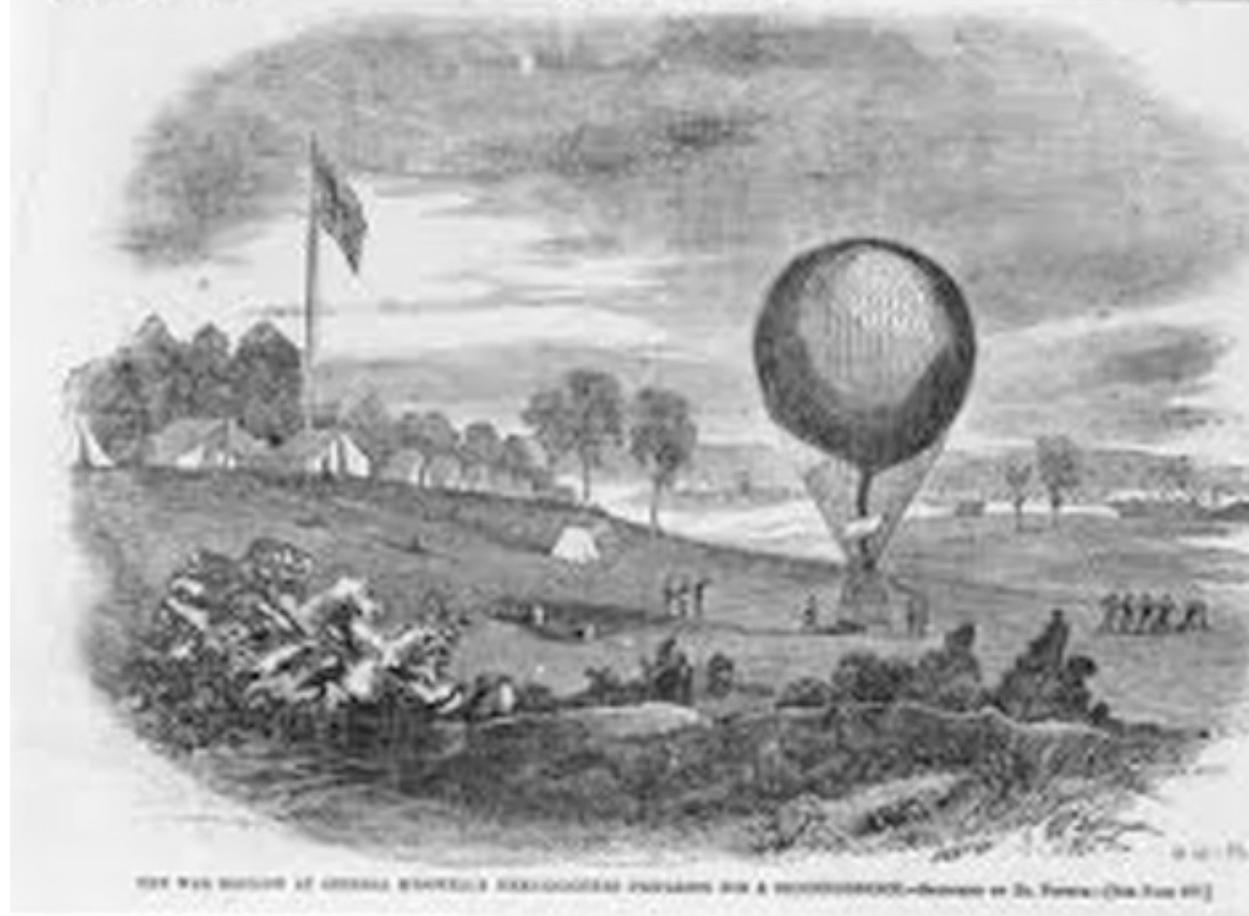
The Confederate Army also used balloons for reconnaissance during the Civil War but on a much smaller scale and with less effectiveness. It is now generally accepted that the government never fully appreciated the value of Lowe's Balloon Corps and by mid-1863 a general lack of support brought Union balloon activities to an end. Perhaps after 150 years the Civil War Sesquicentennial Commemoration will give the Balloon Corps some of the credit it is so long overdue.



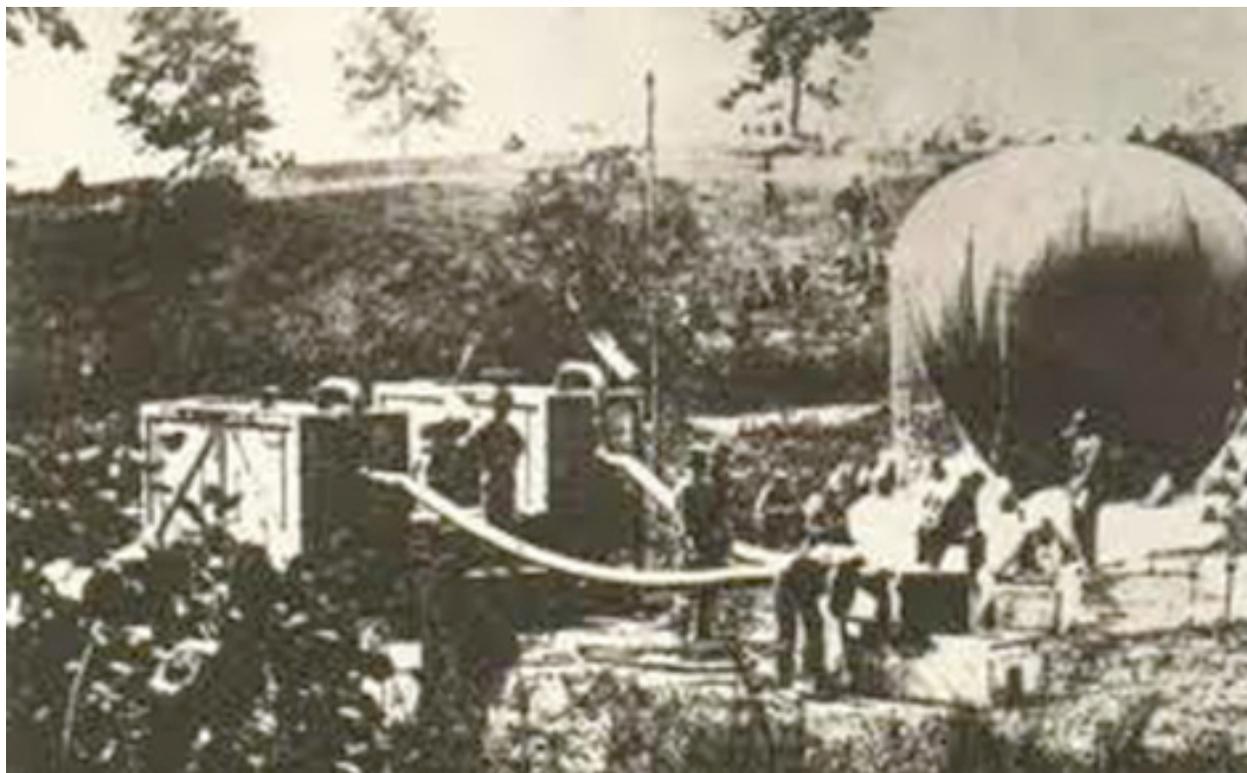
Professor Thaddeus S. C. Lowe



Thaddeus Lowe in balloon observing a camp site at Fair Oaks in Henrico County



Drawing of a balloon in camp from Harpers Weekly



Balloon in the process of being inflated near the battle of Fair Oaks in Henrico County