

Mission to Mason Neck

By SUSAN SCHULTEN

The New York Times

February 24, 2012, 9:30 pm

Disunion follows the Civil War as it unfolded.

Though there was little organized fighting along the Union defenses around Washington, they were continuously harassed by Southern skirmishers through the latter half of 1861 and into 1862. The situation was particularly troublesome in southern Fairfax County, Va., not far from Mount Vernon and Alexandria. Rebels repeatedly challenged the Union pickets and effectively blockaded the Potomac River, which enabled them to smuggle mail and other materials across the river from Maryland.

The capital's vulnerability to the south was worsened by the scarcity of reliable maps, prompting Gen. Winfield Scott to begin a comprehensive mapping effort in the summer of 1861. The Union defeat at Bull Run derailed the effort for a time, but by the end of the year the Coast Survey and the Office of Topographical Engineers had produced an impressive map of northeastern Virginia. Issued on New Year's Day 1862, it was the first large and detailed map of the area, drawn from existing sources as well as new surveys.

Among the map's contributors was Gen. Samuel Heintzelman, who was then responsible for defending the capital and would soon be named a commander in the Army of the Potomac. At his side was Capt. William Heine, a Prussian topographical engineer who had been the official artist on Commodore Matthew Perry's expedition to Japan. Days after the map was issued, Heine came across the sketches and maps of Robert Knox Sneden, a private stationed near the capital with the 40th New York Volunteers. Heine was impressed by what he saw; desperate for mapmakers, he recruited Sneden on the spot.

A week later, on Jan. 12, Sneden reported to Fort Lyon, where Heintzelman showed him the new map of Virginia and described the local situation. Pohick Creek, about 10 miles southwest of Alexandria, was by then the forward line of the Union Army, while the Confederates held the

Occoquan River, about 5 miles farther south. Heintzelman instructed Sneden to focus his mapping efforts on the area in between — a marshy bit of land known as Mason Neck — where the smugglers lived and rebels retreated after their repeated attacks on the Union line.

Throughout January and February, Sneden and Heine gathered intelligence on the region, aided immensely by three individuals. First, they befriended a white resident who was ostracized and attacked once his Union sympathies became known. This scout identified all the homes and meeting places of secessionists, which Sneden then marked on the map in red. He also showed them which boats were bringing mail across the Potomac at night.

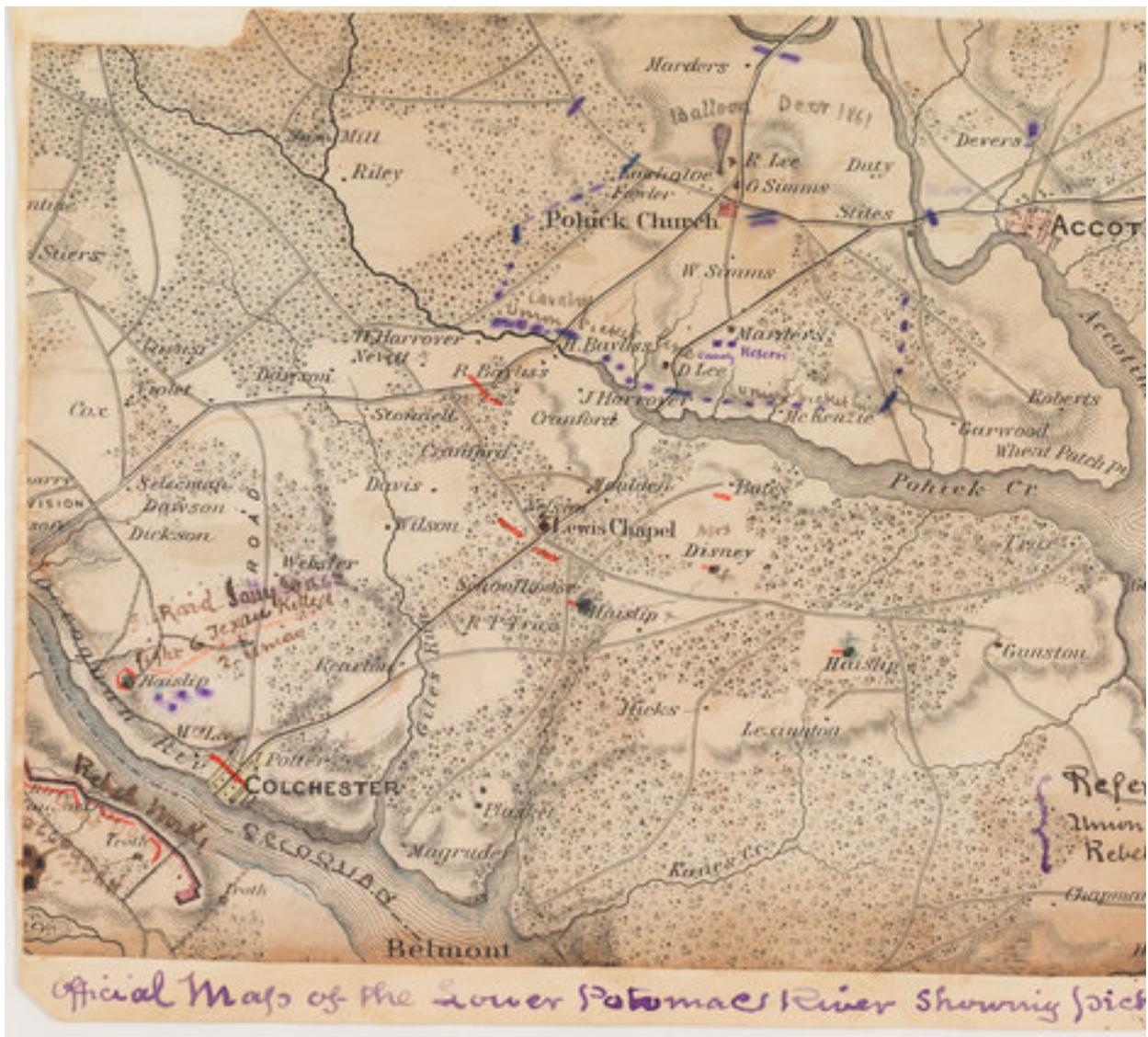
Then, on Jan. 24, a slave named Harry escaped to the Union picket line. Rather than return him to his owner, as other officers might have, Captain Heine took him on as a guide and servant. He gave him a uniform, a pistol, a sabre and “a good horse.” A full year before the Emancipation Proclamation or the enlistment of black soldiers, Harry became the first black cavalryman of the war. He knew every road and path in the area, and, according to Sneden, “would fight to the death before allowing himself to be captured.”

This intelligence on the ground was augmented by aerial reconnaissance. In late January, Thaddeus Lowe used a balloon to survey the landscape, and noticed that Confederates were building earthworks to the south (marked in red on the map). Heine immediately organized a raid on Colchester with two goals in mind: to measure these earthworks that Lowe had spotted, and to capture the rebel smugglers. On the night of Jan. 29, he took 50 men from the 37th New York, with Sneden and Harry to guide them. Just five days earlier, Harry had been a slave; now he was leading an armed raid against his former owners.

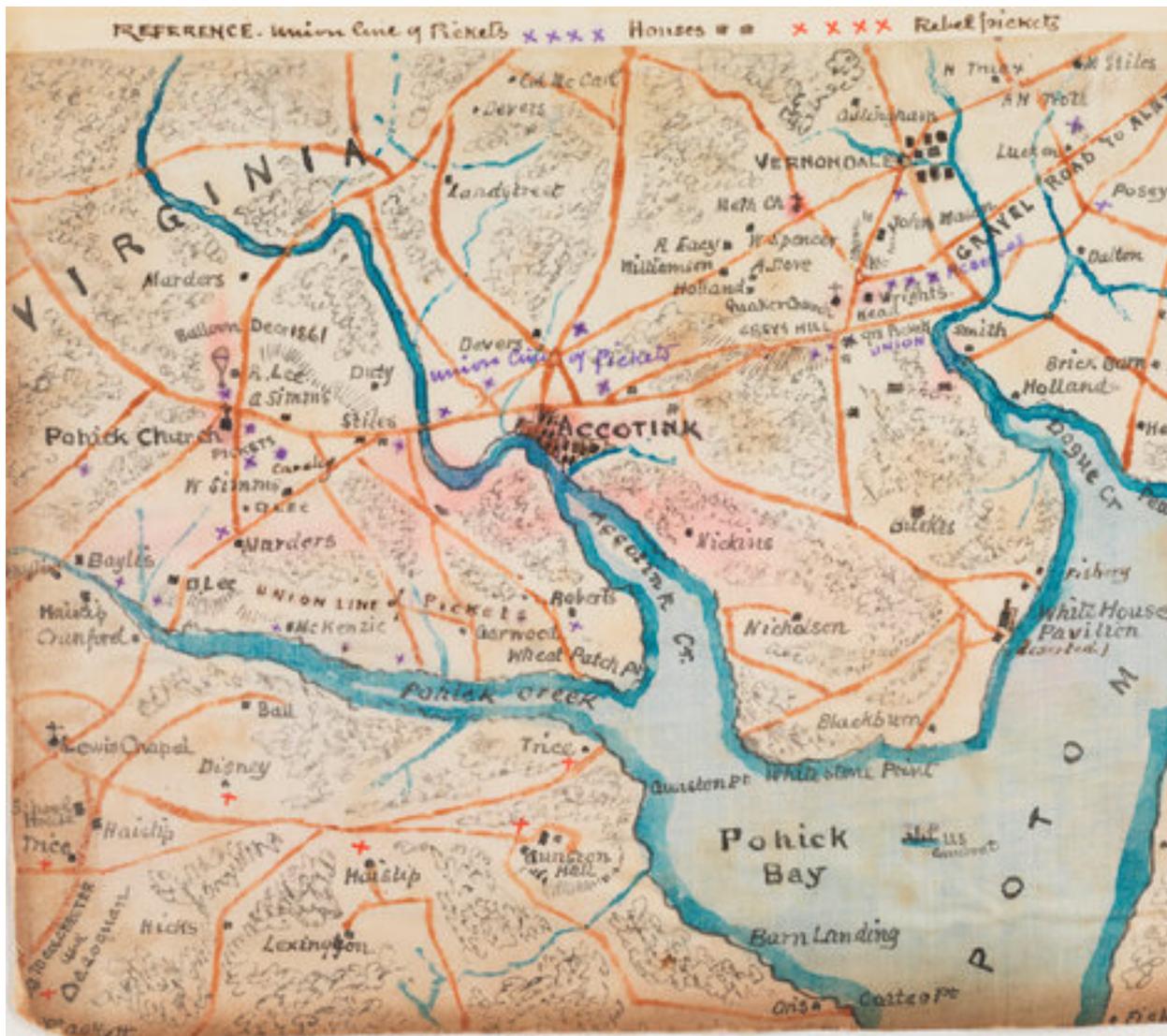
Aided by a full moon, the men crept across Pohick Creek and soon encountered slaves chopping wood on the other side. Though terrified, the slaves told the soldiers where to find rebel sympathizers in the area. Even more important, they told Heine where he could find “old man Potter,” the chief mail smuggler.

The men trudged on, wading through a terrible mix of snow and filthy red mud toward the house where Potter was known to be that night. This was Sneden's first encounter with combat, and he described it in his diary. Outside the door, Heine yelled out "Surrender you d---d Rebels instantly!" and then burst through with both guns blazing. After a firefight, the Confederates surrendered "amid cries and much swearing." About 10 of the enemy had been killed, including 6 Texas Rangers. Potter was found in the attic, hiding under blankets in a bed between two women. As Sneden wrote, though 70, Potter was still vigorous and defiant, an "ugly customer to handle" who "bit, yelled, and kicked like a wild animal."

Confederates stationed across the Occoquan River heard the skirmish and responded by shelling the woods around Colchester. The Union men retreated, but were aggressively pursued. Harry again proved invaluable, rerouting the men on byroads that brought them safely north of Pohick Creek.



The first map, above, is Sneden's annotated version of a section of the Army's larger map, on which he marked Confederate pickets, earthworks, homes of secessionists and the raid of Jan. 29. Note also the balloon reconnaissance at Pohick Church, which alerted Heine to the rebel activity to the south. The second map is Sneden's own map of the region, which he drew and distributed in January and February of 1862 (he colored it in after the war). He made dozens of maps like this of Fairfax County, and more than 300 throughout the war.



By March, the Confederates had evacuated Mason Neck. This brought scores of slaves to the Union line, though many more were spirited deeper into Confederate territory by their owners. The absence of reliable maps continued to have profound consequences for both sides. As one Confederate officer remarked, the Confederates knew no more about the topography of the area around Richmond than they did of Central Africa.

McClellan and the Union Army would learn this the hard way: his plans to capture Richmond foundered on maps that were not just outdated, but inaccurate. Sneden was in high demand in the spring of 1862, as he worked furiously alongside the Corps of Topographical Engineers and the Coast Survey to provide maps for the coming invasion of the Virginia

Peninsula.

Sources: The diary of Robert Knox Sneden can be found in Charles Bryan and Nelson Lankford, eds. "Eye of the Storm"; Sneden's maps and drawings can be found in Charles Bryan, James Kelly, and Nelson Lankford, eds., "Images from the Storm."

Susan Schulten is a history professor at the University of Denver and the author of "The Geographical Imagination in America, 1880-1950" and the forthcoming "Mapping the Nation: History and Cartography in Nineteenth-Century America."