The View from the Hill

Civil War Letters from Hall's Hill, Virginia
By Scott S. Taylor

Introduction

The lively history of Arlington during the American Civil War is recaptured in a collection of letters recently donated to the Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, in Washington, DC. Twelve letters from the McHarg Family Papers were sent from Hall's Hill, which is located in present-day Arlington County. Several members of the McHarg family of Albany, New York were stationed at Hall's Hill during the early stages of the war. These previously unpublished letters vividly describe skirmishes, camp life, and the Arlington countryside, providing primary source documentation of one of the most significant episodes in Arlington's history.

Hall's Hill figured into the Union plan for defending the capital of Washington, DC. The location derived its name from Bazil Hall, a landowner in Alexandria County in the mid-to-late-1800s, who bought a large tract of land in the county in 1850. Located just east of Falls Church, Hall's Hill was the name of both Bazil Hall's home and the 400-foot hill located there. The area surrounding Hall's Hill in northern Virginia was for a time a no-man's land between Union forces defending the capital and Confederate forces concentrating at strategic points. Small skirmishes between the armies were commonplace. Hoping to prevent an attack on Washington, northern military officials marched troops across the Potomac into Arlington and Alexandria on May 23 and 24. By May 26, northern troops occupied Lee Mansion, which was transformed into the headquarters of Brigadier General Irvin McDowell. As historian C.B. Rose, Jr. indicated, "Arlington Heights in turn had to be protected from attack." Accordingly, with the intent of safeguarding Washington, the federal government created an extensive system of forts below the Potomac.

Although southern forces never directly attacked the Arlington defense, several minor skirmishes occurred in Arlington.⁴ Among the many brushes near Arlington, one in particular was noteworthy in relation to Hall's Hill. From their camp at Munson's Hill near Bailey's Crossroads, rebel forces advanced into Arlington in August 1861 as far as Hall's Hill, only to be forced back by Union cavalry.⁵ On August 31, 1861, Bazil Hall's home was shelled and then burned by Confederates from Upton's Hill.⁶ Writing in 1970, Donald A. Wise recorded that the house at 2230 North Powhatan Street "bears within its walls hidden

scars of the Hall's Hill skirmish which occurred at the time of the 'Battle of Munson Hill,' which was the only notable engagement to take place within the boundaries of Arlington County during the Civil War." Not long after this event, Union troops gained control of Hall's Hill, where they established a camp. A regimental history provides a glimpse of the site at that time:

Hall's Hill was well adapted for a camp. It was a round top, sloping in all directions from the flagstaff which was planted in front of the centre of the line. The camp faced west, the 'line' running north and south, with three Sibley tents on each side of the company streets for the men, with two walltents for the company officers...[and] a line of cook-houses.... An ample parade-ground for company and battalion drills was afforded.... A fine stream of water ran along the base of the hill, affording water for cooking and bathing....Part of Hall's farm consisted of woodland, which furnished fuel for the camp during the winter of 1861-62."8

The Union troops encamped on the hill contributed their part to the defense of Washington, but wreaked havoc on Hall's timber, crops, animals, and fences.⁹

The Union defeat at Bull Run reinforced the need to continue work on the defenses around Arlington and led to frenetic activity to that effect. As a result, the federal army sent waves of volunteers and regulars into the vicinity of Arlington. Union control inched slowly westward. Rose wrote, "On September 24, 1861, Gen. W. F. Smith's division crossed Chain Bridge and began the construction of Forts Marcy and Ethan Allen. Both were finished in a few weeks. While these could be overlooked from Hall's Hill a mile and a half away, it was not considered practical to extend the defense of the bridge that far." It is estimated that the total number of northern troops in Arlington reached 10,000, in relation to a pre-war resident population of 1,486.

Among the Union troops in northern Virginia in 1861 was John McHarg (1813-1884). Though not especially famous, he contributed in a modest way to the northern war effort, just as some of his relatives did in more prominent fashion. A resident of Albany, New York, at the outbreak of the Civil War, John McHarg was married to Martha Whipple (Patch) McHarg. The couple had four children: Sophie King (1840-1903), John William (1843-?), Theodore (1845-1867), and Henry King McHarg (1851-1941). Of interest, in the midst of war in 1863, Sophie married Union officer Horace Porter (1837-1921), who served as an aide-de-camp to General Ulysses S. Grant late in the war and wrote a well-received biography of the general, entitled *Campaigning With Grant*. In late August 1861, John McHarg received an appointment as an assistant quartermaster of U.S. volunteers. Accordingly, he reported to Brigadier General Fitz-John Porter, who assigned him to duty with Brigadier General John Henry

Martindale's 1st Brigade. ¹⁵ John McHarg soon found himself in Arlington, Virginia, amidst a host of Union soldiers frantically engaged in preparing the defenses of the nation's capital.

John McHarg quickly learned his role and responsibilities as assistant quarter-master of volunteers. His eighteen-year-old son John William accompanied him into army service and helped him with his administrative tasks. The elder McHarg admitted, "My duties as an officer of the Quarter Master's Department... were anything but easy or agreeable." Indeed, equipping a fledgling army was a tall order. Lieutenant Colonel Rufus Ingalls, chief quartermaster of the Army of the Potomac from late-1861 to mid-1864, impressed John McHarg, who wrote, "in him I found an officer ready and obliging in answering the many petty questions which I was obliged to ask." Describing the activity during the fall and winter of 1861, father McHarg wrote, "The army was annoyed all winter with preparation for immediate movement." That duty placed John and John William McHarg atop Hall's Hill in present-day Arlington, Virginia, from October 1861 to March 1862. The McHargs' letters from Hall's Hill bring to life the alternating excitement and tedium of camp life in northern Virginia during the early phase of the Civil War.

The Letters

Sent from camp in Hall's Hill, Virginia, and bearing the date October 31, 1861, the first letter in the McHarg Family Papers was penned, in part, by both John William McHarg and his father John McHarg. Writing to his younger brother Henry, John William shared news about the famed Ellsworth Regiment:

I have seen the Ellsworth Regt since you have....this morning I crossed their parade-ground while they were drilling but I was on Dory's [his horse's] back gallopping [sic] quite fast as I was trying to catch a wagon which was to meet father in Washington at 11 o'clock this morning. I had a long gallop after the wagon, at least two miles going as fast as the stumps & ruts would let me & finally caught it on my way back home. I might have saved myself and Dory much trouble had I known which road to take but it is hard to tell which way to go as the country is all cut up with roads leading to different camps. I heard the Ellsworths when they came into camp about 7 o'clock cheering & the band playing, but had heard of them while they were in Washington as the finest regiment in the field. Yesterday morning about 10 o'clock 40 of them marched past our tent[.] They went out foraging & returned about 5 last evening with 10 loads of hay & some other things. We furnished several wagons from our brigade for the expedition & I should have gone with them if I could have left the tent alone. ¹⁹

John William thus remarked on the respected regiment named after Elmer E. Ellsworth, an early Union martyr who was killed by James T. Jackson, man-

My dear Hours I received your letter rows in together with many trens to day of was very glad to receive yours and alsofthe others. I can let out to worke you a very long letter as his evening & in these parts we all go to bed very larly as we have to get up ac - cordingly to meet the applicants for how-bats to, who muke their appearance as com as they ges their break fast on glad hat you have an apportunity to see an Valley of antilleng & Duppose before this you have clearly several times as you are apt to be on hand on such occasions despect to morrow to see the finest right yets that is the review by Heal hi blellan of over 40.000 men, propably much

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ager of the Marshall House Tavern in Alexandria, Virginia, on May 24, 1861, after taking down a rebel flag from the roof of that establishment. Ellsworth's Zouaves were known for their colorful dress and exquisite drills, and they inspired countless northerners, such as John William McHarg.

For his part, when father John wrote a note to his son Henry in the same letter, he alluded to a new technology which would leave an unprecedented visual record of the war. John reported, "I went to [Mathew] Brady's and sat for my photograph today. When done I will send some home."²⁰ Unfortunately, John's photo has long since been lost, but his generation's fascination with photography is documented by the letter.

In the second letter sent from Hall's Hill, John William described a grand review of troops undertaken by General George B. McClellan. Staged close to Hall's Hill at Bailey's Crossroads, Virginia, this particular review was noteworthy as it was the largest military review in the history of the western hemisphere up to that time.²¹ The letter is transcribed, in part, below:

Halls Hill Va Nov 19th 1861

My dear Henry,

I received your letter of Nov 5th together with many others, to-day & I was very glad to receive yours and also the others.... I expect to-morrow to see the finest sight yet, that is the review by Genl McClellan of over 40,000 men, probably much cavalry & artillery, which later I have no doubt you would like very much to see as I know I shall, although I have already seen a good many soldiers but am not tired of them yet. A band has just stopped playing alongside our tent in the camp of the 17th N.Y.; we have plenty of such music.... I am going to see the review & as it is to be held about two miles from here & I shall probably have to walk, it will occupy most of the day.... Give my love & Father's to all at home.

Affec your brother John²²

Though drills and daily camp life made most days monotonous, some exhilarating action occurred at times. The Confederates and Federals alike probed their opponents' defenses. John William detailed a recent skirmish in a letter sent on November 27, 1861:

Every morning about eight o'clock there passes our tent, a picket of cavalry numbering about 75 horses; these men go outside of our lines on scouting expeditions sometimes going as far as five miles into the enemy's country & usually accompanied by a scout. I particularly noticed them yesterday as they stopped a much longer time than usual in front of headquarters, probably

awaiting orders. About 4 o'clock vesterday afternoon, while I was at the blacksmith shop waiting for Dory whom I was having shod, a man came along on a full gallop & shortly returned when we asked what was the matter & he then told us that the cavalry had been attacked & were probably all prisoners or killed, except himself, as he had escaped through the woods & could not find his companions he also said that our daily infantry pickets had been driven in. He had carried the news to head guarters & in a few minutes the roll was beaten in the different camps & the 17th N.Y., which is directly behind us, soon assembled on the parade ground & marched off towards Falls Church. The other regiments got their canteens & knapsacks filled & stood around waiting orders to go on. Their ambulances & ammunition wagons were harnessed & all ready, but about 6 o'clock the news came that our regiments were coming back to camp not having been able to find any enemy. When they came in they brought quite a different account from the first, it was that the cavalry had been found with all their horses & had about 17 empty saddles; among the missing was a lieutenant. The cavalry report that they went about 5 miles beyond Falls Church & while going through a thick piece of woods their guide suddenly fired his musket into the air and about 200 rebels sprang up & fired at our men, we immediately returned the fire & then put about & scattered in every direction, as it was impossible to do anything in the woods & underbrush. The rebels were probably very much disappointed in not capturing the whole party as they might have done with a little more care & judgement. Our guide was a traitor & would be shot if caught, but he, like many such has escaped & it is lucky for him. The pickets last night were doubled & extra care taken, so that we should not be surprised. Only part of the regiments returned last night & the rest came in this morning. Genl McClellan went out with his body-guard about ½ past 5 yesterday & returned about seven. He passed directly in front of our door....23

This lengthy letter certainly recaptures the tension and uncertainty associated with encamping in a position such as Hall's Hill on the perimeter of one's defenses so close to enemy forces.

As the northern army secured points south of the Potomac, northern Virginian society was in flux. In the confusion of pro-southern elements retreating and pro-Union elements advancing, many slaves seeking their freedom moved into Union camps. John McHarg, writing to his brother, Rufus King McHarg on December 5, 1861 touched on the lot of freed slaves and the prospects of emancipation:

My contraband, whom I was obliged to send home some days ago, as he was taken away from his mistress[?] by one of our General's aids <u>eloped</u> on his <u>own account</u> this time and returned to me yesterday about daybreak. Henceforth, if he behaves himself, he is to be my servant and when I go he goes, either South or North. His wife and two children are slaves belonging

to a widow living about 4 miles from here. I think he has made arrangements for her to join him in Washington whenever it becomes necessary. He says that he never saw a darky that <u>did not desire his freedom</u>. As our army advances, emancipation follows.²⁴

In his last letter from Hall's Hill during the year 1861, dated four days before Christmas, John provided his brother Rufus with insights into camp life:

....This army is tired of remaining stationary—nothing would please the boys better than the command to go forward, but there are no indications of a move: on the contrary the elaborate manner in which the soldiers are ornamenting their camps with festoons and arches of evergreens, which latter are plenty thereabouts shows plainly that they have made up their minds that we are in winter quarters. In many of the camps the log homes, erected by soldiers are to be seen –as yet I am content to be in a tent and get along pretty comfortably too-except when I have one of my headaches, of which I have been visited by two within as many weeks-both times the sun shone down upon the roof of the tent powerfully and during the entire afternoon the Brigades about this neighborhood were going through target firing & battalion firing, not the most agreeable music for a headache. The weather from being delightful for about three weeks, has this day changed and tonight the wind is from the northwest & guite winterish. The troops all along this line are drilled daily and constantly, so that an army this time, not a mob, will go forward when the order is given[.]²⁵

The soldiers' New Year's Day celebration at Hall's Hill on the first day of the year 1862 is documented by a letter from John William to his young brother Henry:

From this hill you have a view of the country for nearly ten miles & probably can see the country very near Vienna & Fairfax, but the villages themselves cannot be seen....It is very cold in Albany, but I can scarcely believe it when I have all day been sitting around, in doors & out, in my shirt sleeves so that I may keep comfortable. I have just reminded Father of the change since last New Year's Day, & the many calls that will be missed on account of this horrid war. I have this afternoon been over to see a comic parade of the 44th but I do not think that it was as good as on Christmas, but it may be that it was stale to me having once seen it. On the spot was "Our Special Artist" of the Harpers Weekly, so in the course of a week or two you will be able to see the photograph of the 44th "en costume."... I have just come from supper & I will tell you the supper that the people in these parts expect for New Years [sic] Day. At the head of the table was a roasted goose & spread in a manner that would not please Miss Sophie were cold biscuit, cake frosted, & cake not frosted, molasses candy, (or as it is called here "yellow taffy") & mottoes[?], in our lingo, & in theirs "kisses" and also a plate of apples. This of course is an extra meal & you must not imagine that we are accustomed to

such living but rather imagine us as living on very plain but the healthiest of food...With love & a "happy new Year" to all[.]²⁶

On the last day of January 1862, John opened a letter by describing his duties to his brother Rufus in the quartermaster's department of the 1st Brigade, Porter's Division and closed by mentioning soldiers' funerals:

Making up my Ouarterly Returns to the Government is what has kept me busy. Every Abstract has to be made in duplicate, many of them in triplicate & some in quadruplicate. All public Property that has passed through my hands has to be accounted for, and when you know that nearly 400,000 pounds of Hay & over 325.000 lbs of oats have been issued by me since entering upon duty, beside all kinds of Quartermaster's stores in the shape of Horses, wagons & their Harness and accompaniments you must not be surprised that I was puzzled somewhat how to do it but I finally worked out the whole thing accounting, by vouchers, even to a Hame String [sic]. 12 o'clock at night has found me at it, but now my papers are in. I feel some relief, altho' daily & hourly new calls are made upon the "Quartermaster." It was not unfinished business alone that drove me but new business connected with our contemplated move came in. For this Division is to be moved at no distant day but where I do not know now but I must necessarily know in season to arrange for moving my Brigade. As we are in the front and the crack Division upon this side of the river many think we are to prep on towards Centreville but I have reason to doubt it and in a few days I believe you'll find I'm right.... Of course, there is an increase of disease among the recruits especially. Two of the 2nd Maine were buried yesterday. They were of that class. Last night Adjutant Hodges of the 18th Mass., also of my Brigade, died of fever. As I sat writing in my tent yesterday p.m., I heard the not unusual solemn music of "another soldier's funeral" it was the 2nd Maine Band, one of the best bands in the army; they were performing the same dirge that I had frequently heard and for the same purpose; it was awfully solemn but perfectly exquisite music. The small escort detailed for the last service to the two poor soldiers wound their way over the crest of the hill just off my quarters to a burying ground where many a poor New Englander lies buried far from his home. A few minutes afterwards I heard the three vollies [sic] fired over the grave & then again the detachment coming back quick....²⁷

Several letters show soldiers awaiting orders to march and speculating about when a new offensive will begin. On February 4, John wrote to Rufus, "You need not look for any movement of the army until the roads improve. I think by the 'ides of March' <u>our George</u> [McClellan] will make the Rebels feel the anaconda's grip. Those who remain at home must be patient. Armies are not made in a month. If we don't crush the Rebellion the coming spring, one never shall. Therefore when we strike it must be an unerring blow, not a Bull Run..." Ten days later, John provided Rufus with more thoughts on the army's next move, noting:

This A.M. a large reconnoitering force, consisting of Cavalry and Infantry, went out towards our front. At early dawn as I laid in my tent I heard the confused noise of a great many men talking. It proved to be the 44th NY of [Daniel] Butterfield's Brigade setting out on the march. Afterwards I saw a large body of Cavalry pass along the road opposite my quarters. I understand that a large force from Smith's Division the next above us goes forward too. Genl [Fitz-John] Porter dined at our mess yesterday and there spoke of the movements of the Rebels for a day or two past. It appears they have in large force approached nearer to our lines showing themselves to our scouts & Pickets. Whether there [sic] object is to dash suddenly upon our most exposed portion of troops as we did lately upon them at Drainsville [sic], or to draw a curtain as it were over their movements at Centreville is more than we can now tell. They may be withdrawing some of their forces from Centreville to use them where they are more needed, for up to this time we have compelled them to keep a large army doing nothing all last fall & though the winter...The troops returned a short time ago, went a couple of miles beyond Vienna but saw "nary rebel." Jno was at Falls Church Station all day drawing Forage. He says there is a large detachment of soldiers repairing the rail-road from that point down to Vienna. This looks as though we wanted the road for use. Our troops are healthy and in fine spirits, all anxious for a brush."29

On March 2, in the last of the McHarg family letters sent from Hall's Hill, John told Rufus the following:

Just after dark it commenced raining making the camp dismal enough, except that after the usual hour for "taps" when the soldiers are required to put out lights, canteens could be seen on all the hills about us flitting around and the tents of the men lighted up expecting the summons to move at every hour...Up to this time we have been expecting to march and all preparations made. The rumors that you had about Genl. Banks' army having been defeated &c arose from our contemplated movement. We were to have gone to Washington, take the cars to the Relay House, from thence to Harper's Ferry and there, joined by Banks & others crossed into Va. & so enter the Valley of the Shenandoah and threaten Manassas from the rear. McClellan is, or has been, up there and I'm inclined to believe that this will be the programme when we do march. The roads have improved very rapidly of late & offer now no impediment to the "onward" of the army...It being left for a future determination whether we press on through the Shenandoah Valley or return here. If we do the former, then in due time our entire equipage will join us...30

As it turned out, John's predictions turned out to be inaccurate. Yes, he was among the Union troops who embarked upon a major offensive in the spring of 1862. However, when McHarg and his fellow troops left the Hall's Hill area on March 10, 1862, his unit moved first to Fairfax Court House and

then to a camp near Alexandria. On March 21, McHarg was en route to Fortress Monroe to participate in the Peninsular Campaign.³¹ By April 19, John was writing letters from Yorktown, Virginia.

One last McHarg letter sent from Hall's Hill merits special attention. Although undated, the letter provides valuable commentary on Arlington House, the former home of Robert E. Lee. The letter was written sometime between October 1861 and March 1862. It was at Arlington House in 1831 that Lee, who considered the mansion his home, married Mary Anne Randolph Custis. Thirty years later, on April 22, 1861, Lee accepted command of Virginia's forces, and his family soon left the house for good. The mansion became the site of Union headquarters, and soon the house and grounds felt the presence of an encamped army. John's letter comments on the effects of the war on Arlington House:

Arlington House, formerly the magnificent residence of the Rebel General Lee, is the Grand Depot upon this side of the river for all Ouartermasters Stores, except clothing & tents. Of course I keep an open account there and go there too very often. My horse, whom I call "Dory" after Theodore, knows the road well. I forget whether I ever told you about this spot, fit only for a baronial residence, now converted into a vast office or accounting[?] room. Parlors fitted with desks and tables all occupied by clerks, the many marks upon the walls indicating a gallery of pictures, removed it's true. In one instance a very large frame remaining, the picture cut out in the great haste to flee from their country & home. There are still remaining in the halls some historical pictures of our Revolutionary War and at least a dozen deer's [sic] heads, antlers & all. This place, you are aware, descended from the Custis family, relatives of Genl. Washington. The location is superb. overlooking Washington & the Potomac for a long distance below. I know it is surrounded by a dense and noble forest of great trees undisturbed but the approach from Ball's Cross Roads, which is the route that I take, once covered with dense woods has been & is being stripped by the soldiers of late to feed their camp fires.34

Conclusion

The McHargs' Civil War letters sent from Hall's Hill provide new primary source documentation on the history of Arlington, Virginia, during the great national crisis. The letters demonstrate the historical and strategic importance of Hall's Hill during the Civil War. Furthermore, they add to the historical record the personal experiences of Union troops stationed in the Arlington no-man's land in the first year of the conflict. The McHargs experienced the rigors of camp life, lived among troops engaged in skirmishes, and became familiar with the countryside of northern Virginia. The McHargs left a valuable written record of their days atop Hall's Hill.

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Endnotes

- ¹ Donald A. Wise, "Bazil Hall of Hall's Hill," *Arlington Historical Magazine*, Vol. 6, No. 3, October 1979, p. 21. Present-day Arlington County was named Alexandria County until 1920, when it was renamed for the Custis-Lee family estate.
- ² For details, see William H. Price, "Civil War Military Operations in Northern Virginia in May-June 1861," *Arlington Historical Magazine*, Vol. 2, No. 1, October 1961.
- ³ C.B. Rose, Jr., "Civil War Forts in Arlington," Arlington Historical Magazine, Vol. 1, No. 4, October 1960, p. 14.
- ⁴ C.B. Rose, Jr. Arlington County, Virginia: A History (Arlington, VA: Arlington Historical Society, 1976), p. 108.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Wise, "Bazil Hall of Hall's Hill," p. 22.
- ⁷ Donald A. Wise, "A Tour of Historical Sites in Arlington County," *Arlington Historical Magazine*, Vol. 4, No. 2, October 1970, p. 39.
- ⁸ John Love Parker and Robert G. Carter, *Henry Wilson's Regiment: History of the Twenty-Second Massachusetts Infantry* (Boston: Regimental Association, 1887), as quoted in Wise, "Bazil Hall of Hall's Hill," p. 23.
- 9 Wise, "Bazil Hall of Hall's Hill," p. 23.
- 10 Rose, "Civil War Forts in Arlington," p. 18.
- 11 Rose, Arlington County, Virginia, p. 107.
- ¹² McHarg Family Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, DC.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Ibid., Box 1 Folder 61.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Ibid.
- ¹⁸ Ibid. ¹⁹ Ibid., Box 1 Folder 1.
- 20 Ihid
- ²¹ Nan Netherton, Fairfax County, Virginia: A History (Fairfax, VA: Fairfax County Board of Supervisors, 1978), p. 328.
- 22 McHarg Family Papers, Box 1 Folder 2.
- 23 Ibid., Box 1 Folder 3.
- ²⁴ Ibid., Box 1 Folder 5.
- 25 Ibid., Box 1 Folder 7.
- 26 Ibid., Box 1 Folder 9.
- 27 Ibid., Box 1 Folder 12.
- 28 Ibid., Box 1 Folder 13.
- 29 Ibid., Box 1 Folder 14.
- 30 Ibid., Box 1 Folder 16.
- 31 Ibid., Box 1 Folder 61.

Rose, Arlington County, Virginia, p. 99.
 Ibid., p. 108.
 McHarg Family Papers, Box 1 Folder 12.