

Totopotomoy Creek Battlefield at Rural Plains



The earliest known and previously unpublished view of the Shelton House, Rural Plains, is this May 1864 sketch by combat artist Alfred Waud. Park staff discovered the image in the collections of the National Archives.

National Archives



Generals Barlow, Hancock, Birney and Gibbon, in the field, near Cold Harbor, Virginia, 1864.

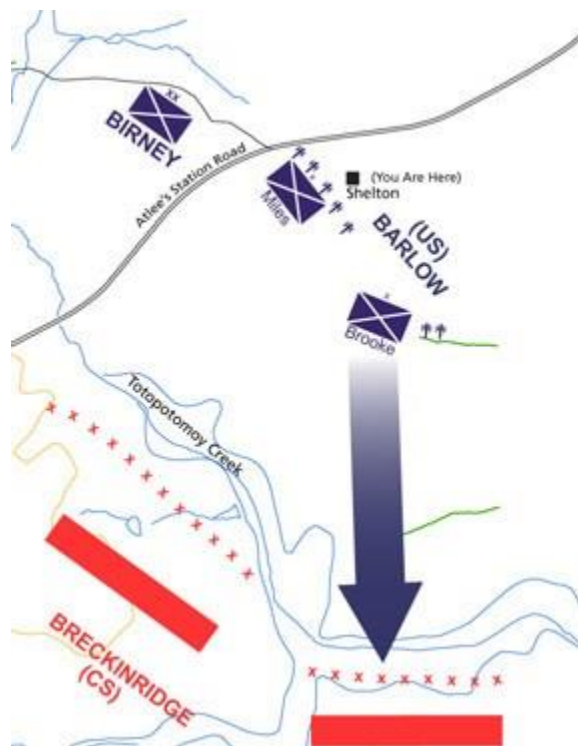
Library of Congress

The Battle

When the contending armies left the North Anna battlefield on May 27, 1864, they moved closer to Richmond. After crossing the Pamunkey River at two locations about five miles northeast of here, the Union army pushed forward on May 29 to the banks of

Totopotomoy Creek. It found the Confederate army entrenched on the southern side of the creek, blocking the direct route to Richmond. Over the course of four days the opposing sides skirmished, probed and maneuvered for position.

Francis Barlow's division of the Second Corps arrived here on May 29. The men found Sarah Shelton and most of her children--ranging in age from 14 to 35--at the house and determined to stay there. Union signalmen climbed onto the roof to direct their artillery. Incoming Confederate fire hit the house at least fifty times, but the Sheltons stayed in their basement. Barlow's men eventually built strong earthen entrenchments just west and south of the house. They brought in field cannon and even a few mortars. For a time Major General Winfield S. Hancock, commander of the Second Corps, made his headquarters beneath the eastern porch of the house.

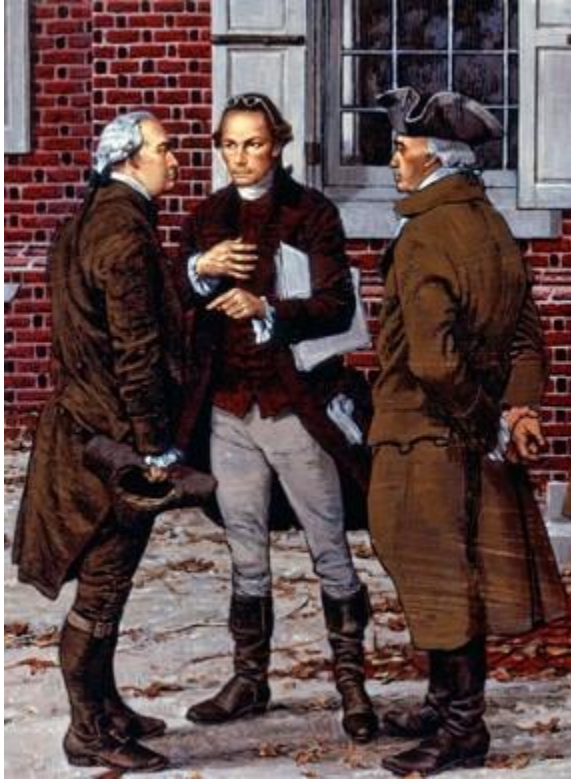


Union and Confederate positions along Totopotomoy Creek, May 30, 1864.

National Park Service

Late on May 30, Barlow's division attacked. Col. John R. Brooke's brigade pushed down the slope and across the creek under fire. It drove off a line of Confederate defenders, losing more than one hundred men in the endeavor, before pulling back toward the Shelton House in the darkness. The following day Barlow renewed his advance, getting three of his four brigades across the creek for a short time. The two days of fighting in front of the Shelton House cost Barlow about 300 casualties and produced no conclusive results. By June 1 Ulysses Grant began to extend his army's line southward toward Cold Harbor, permanently abandoning the Totopotomoy Creek battlefield.

The marsh and the stream were between us and the enemy's position, and while the men sinking to their middles in the oozy mud were doing their best to push through it, a galling and plunging fire was directed upon them from the rebel line.
--Robert Robertson, Union staff officer, on the June 1 assault of Barlow's division.



Patrick Henry confers with fellow delegates at the First Continental Congress in 1774. From a painting by Louis Glanzman.

Louis Glanzman

The Shelton Story

One hundred and ten years before the contending Civil War armies collided here, patriot and orator Patrick Henry married Sarah Shelton, of this house. Family legend maintains that the wedding occurred in the parlor on the northwest side of the main floor. Henry grew to manhood in this county. He delivered his legendary "Give me liberty or give me death!" speech in Richmond in 1775.

Built in about 1725, the house remained in the Shelton family continuously for more than 280 years. The final generation of Sheltons sold the home and 124 acres to the Totopotomoy Battlefield at Rural Plains Foundation in 2001. The Foundation donated the house and land to Richmond National Battlefield Park in 2006, thus ensuring that countless generations of interested visitors will have access to the historic property.

Preserving the site's many resources and making them available to the public is a multi-layered process. Emergency repairs to the house have stabilized it. Archeology and related research continues to provide new information about the site's history. The National Park Service envisions *Rural Plains* as a critical stop for anyone touring the 1864 Overland Campaign, bridging the gap between the North Anna battlefield and the Cold Harbor battlefield.

We picked a quantity of straw-berries, and as the family had no coffee, tea nor sugar, we procured some for them, and had a fine supper at a table, like civilized persons, for a novelty. The family were refined and educated, and were very

affable when they found we "Yankees" were civilized beings, and treated them kindly, but we found them rank rebels.

--Robert Robertson diary (staff of Colonel Nelson Miles), May 30, 1864.



Map showing the National Park Service boundary, remaining earthwork positions and walking trail at the Totopotomoy Creek battlefield.

National Park Service

Experiencing the Site Today

Although the centuries-old house is a major attraction, Richmond National Battlefield Park preserves this property because of the Civil War action that occurred here. A walking trail covering 1.25 miles roundtrip allows you to explore terrain that affected the course of the battle. Original breastworks built by Union infantry cover the north slope of Totopotomoy Creek; a footbridge over the creek provides access to entrenchments and cannon positions built by Confederate defenders on the south bank. On two occasions the men of Francis Barlow's division (Union Second Corps) attacked down the slope to the creek. The walking trail follows in their footsteps.

The park also recommends visiting the site of Polegreen Church, two miles southeast of here on Route 643 (Rural Point Road), to learn more about the May 1864 events along Totopotomoy Creek.

Last updated: February 1, 2018