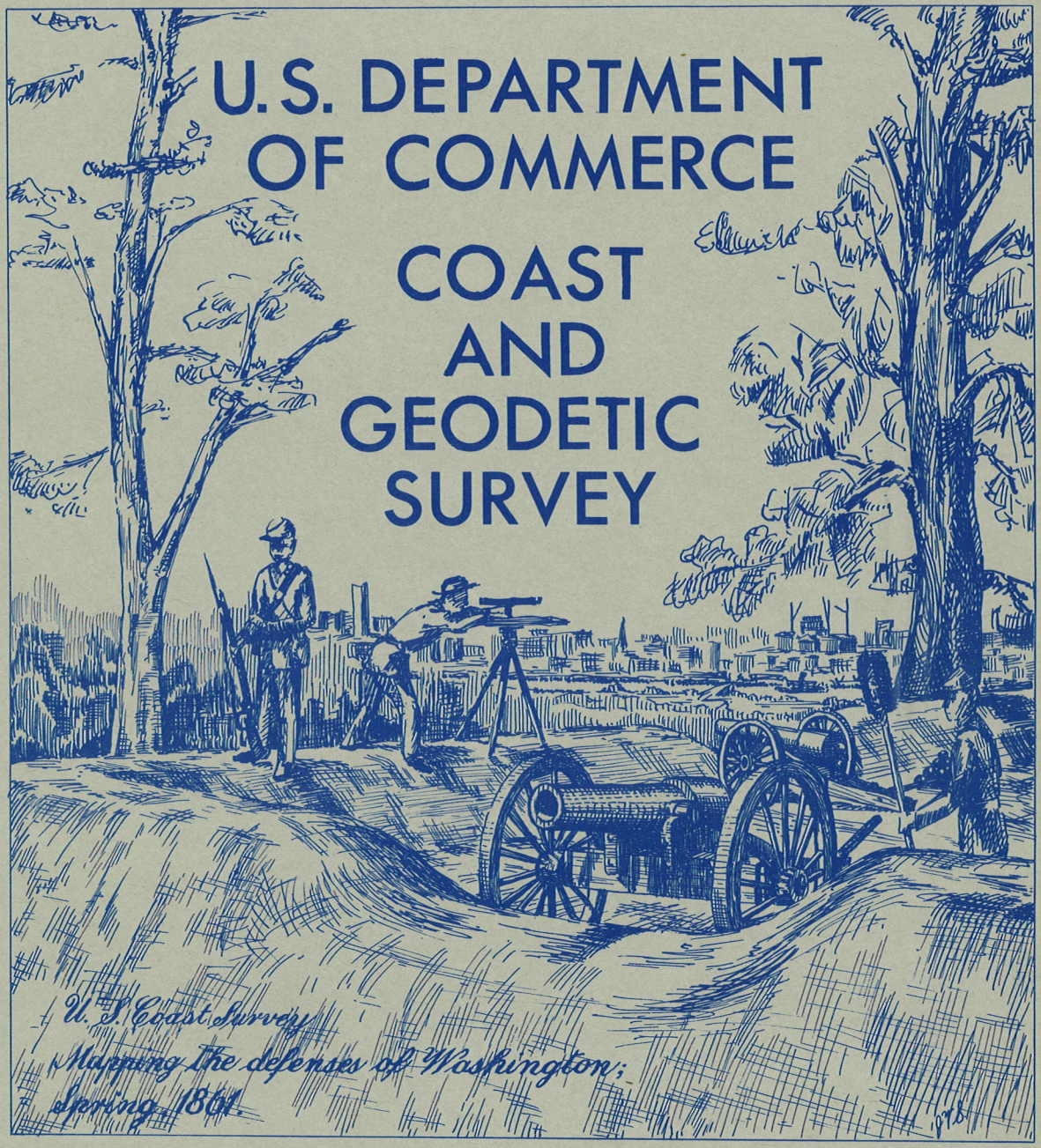
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

COAST AND GEODETIC SURVEY



U. S. Coast Survey
Mapping the defenses of Washington;
Spring, 1861.

CIVIL WAR CENTENNIAL

1961 ~ 1965

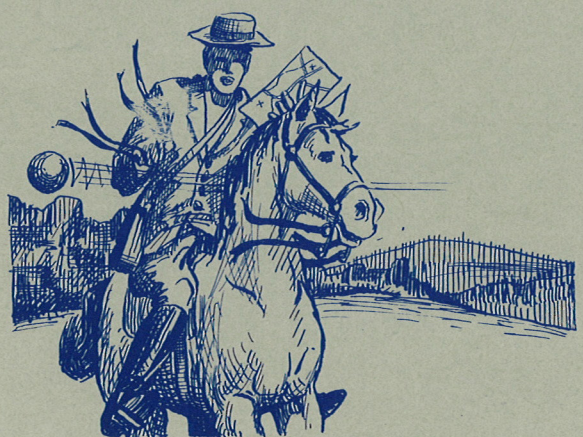
The War Years, 1861-1865

The Coast and Geodetic Survey, known as the U. S. Coast Survey in the mid-nineteenth century, played an important role in the Civil War in contributing charts and maps, surveys and reconnaissances to the U. S. Government. Throughout the war Coast Survey ships and personnel were attached to military forces whenever their skills and services were needed.

Five decades after its founding as a scientific institution in 1807, the Coast Survey was continuing its hygrographic work along the south Atlantic seaboard in 1860, undeterred by impending war. Indeed, its methodic hydrography, topography, tide, current, and oceanographic studies were highly regarded by both North and South.

In December 1860, the Survey Schooner PETREL and the small Steam-tender FIREFLY were seized by the insurgents at Charleston, South Carolina. Unable to obtain their release, and in order to prevent the capture of others, the Superintendent of the Coast Survey ordered all parties to discontinue regular work and return to Washington with their valuable instruments when further progress became impracticable.

In the spring of 1861 preparations were made for resuming the unfinished work in the northern sections of the Atlantic coast and for assisting in special surveys for the military. One of the first requests to come from the War Department asked that a survey be made of the defenses of Washington to include all the detailed features of ground occupied by the army under Brigadier General Irvin McDowell (see cover illustration). The work began in June with General Tyler and Colonel Heintzelman providing armed guards for the protection of the surveyors, F. W. Dorr and Cleveland Rockwell. Although Rockwell had to interrupt his field surveys once when hostile forces approached his camp, the project was completed in July 1861, before the First Battle of Bull Run.



During 1862, forty-nine Coast Survey officers served in military operations. Sub-Assistant Dorr narrowly escaped being killed before Yorktown. The instrument with which he was working was shattered, a soldier on picket duty nearby was killed outright, and two members of the survey party were mortally wounded.

On the Mississippi River, the Coast Survey vessel SACHEM, commanded by F. H. Gerdes, was assigned to survey the area south of Forts Jackson and St. Phillips then held by the Southern forces. By April 18, 1862, when the Union mortar vessels arrived to lay siege to this Confederate stronghold, the SACHEM had determined the exact distances and directions of fire for the mortars. As a result, the fire was so accurate the forts were utterly destroyed. The mission was risky--the SACHEM was not a large vessel, an added hazard because the Mississippi at this time was over its banks, and riflemen hidden along the shore frequently fired on the crew.

During the summer of 1863, when Philadelphia and other eastern cities were vulnerable to attack, the Coast Survey's Superintendent Alexander Dallas Bache personally directed a party of surveyors assigned to Philadelphia. In June Professor Bache reconnoitered an area of eighty square miles, including the construction sites for a number of small field works which were to be built if needed.

Coast Survey Assistant J. G. Oltmanns, who had served aboard the SACHEM at Ft. Jackson, later served under Union Major General W. B. Franklin at the battles of Sabine Cross Roads and Pleasant Hill, Louisiana, in 1864. Oltmanns

drew the battlefield plans reproduced in this folder. During these important engagements General Franklin was seriously wounded, forcing him to retire from battle. The Union retreat from Sabine Cross Roads was nearly disastrous, but Franklin's army reassembled to check the Confederate advance at Pleasant Hill. While at Sabine Cross Roads, Assistant Oltmanns had a bridle cut from his hand by a shell.

During the first attack on Fort Fisher, North Carolina, in 1865, Admiral David D. Porter ordered the LOUISIANA to be moved right under the wall of the fort and exploded. Preparing for this move, Coast Survey Assistant J. S. Bradford went in during the night and sounded the place where the ship was to go and directed its placement right on the edge of the beach.

Two officers of the Coast Survey accompanied General Sherman's march, but it was so rapid that surveys were rarely required. When the march ended at Goldsboro, North Carolina, the Survey officers prepared a map of that vicinity.

Throughout the war thousands of additional charts were reproduced for the military. In 1864 alone the Coast Survey produced and distributed 37,000 copies of its regular charts, 23,000 of them for the Navy. The Washington office of the Coast Survey, then located on Capitol Hill, responded to scores of requests from generals, naval officers, Congressmen, and others for services and charts. Near the end of the war Superintendent Bache stated in one of his official reports: "The tangible evidence of utility thus presented to a class of minds eminently practical has continued to elicit the warm commendation which marked our first connexion (sic) with the military and naval forces of the Government at the outset of the war."

The Centennial, 1961-1965

The Coast and Geodetic Survey hopes that through the Centennial its role in the Civil War can be made known. This folder presents only a few of the colorful highlights resulting from the actual support of military and naval forces. The Coast and Geodetic Survey files contain numerous charts, surveys, reports, and documents that may be of considerable value to historians, researchers, and groups interested in the Civil War. During the Centennial these documents will be made available to the public for the first time.

Many original field surveys, manuscripts, and notes have not previously been published. Because these bits of information could very well shed new light on some little-known campaign or event, Rear Admiral H. Arnold Karo, Director of the Coast and Geodetic Survey, appointed a Civil War Centennial Committee to guide the Bureau's participation in these efforts.

In November 1960, the Committee adopted a number of aims that it hopes to fulfill during the four-year observance. These are principally to (1) assemble and catalog maps, field surveys, and reports in the Survey's historical collection related to the Civil War period; (2) compile data on Coast and Geodetic Survey ships and personnel that participated in the conflict; (3) assist researchers and historians in their search for source material; (4) publish a folio of contemporary maps and drawings in their original form; and (5) issue periodic news releases, special announcements, and publications reporting the Survey's role in the war and its progress during the Centennial.

The map folio, now in production, will be a limited edition of selected maps, original surveys, and drawings prepared by Coast Survey personnel between 1861-1865. The twenty sheets (approximately 24 by 30 inches) will be printed in black-and-white on heavy chart paper suitable for display. The folio should be available to the public early in the Centennial period.

Chief responsibility for the U. S. Department of Commerce in the Centennial Observance is lodged with the Coast and Geodetic Survey. For this reason the Secretary of Commerce has designated Mr. Albert A. Stanley, a member of Admiral Karo's staff, to serve as liaison officer between the Department and the National Civil War Centennial Commission. Major General U. S. Grant III, Chairman of the National Commission, referring to the Survey's collection of Civil War maps, urged the Secretary of Commerce to "establish liaison between your Department and this Commission so this source material can be made available to historians and others to whom it would be of value.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION, WRITE:

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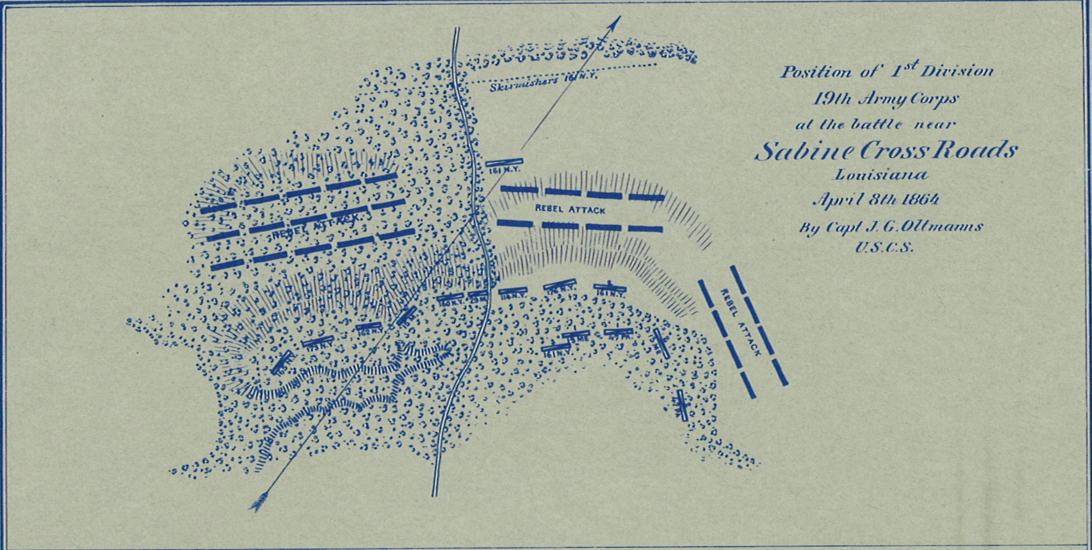

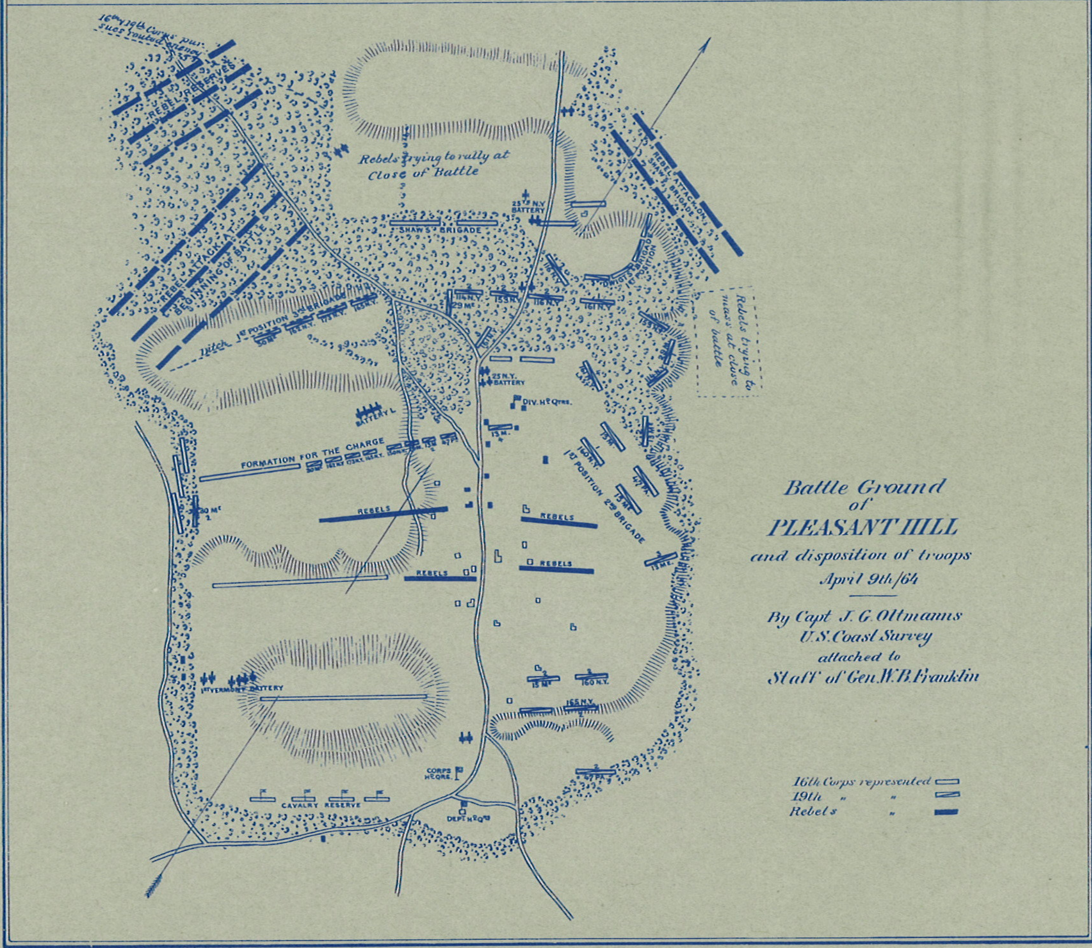

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