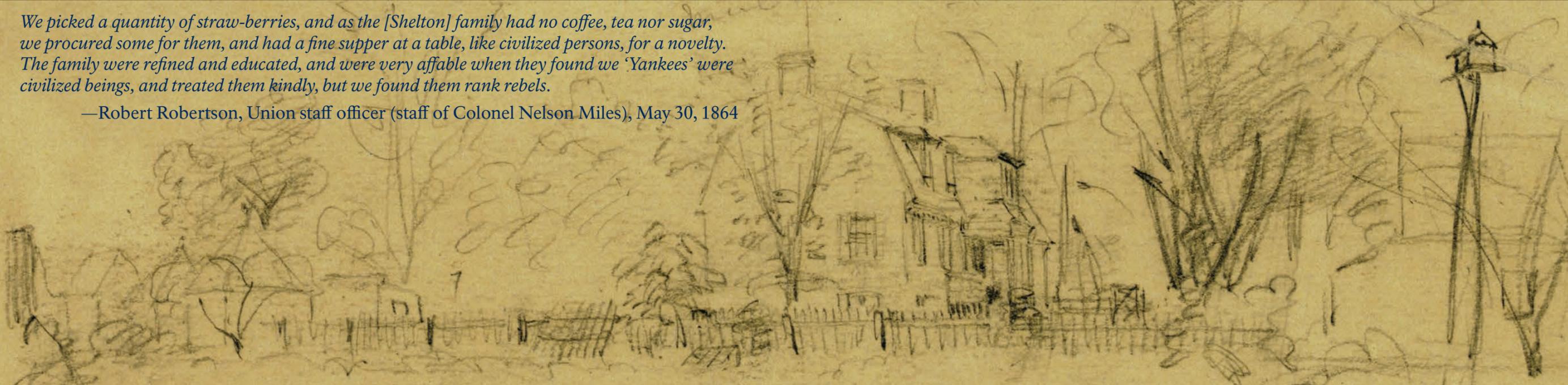


Totopotomoy Creek Battlefield at Rural Plains

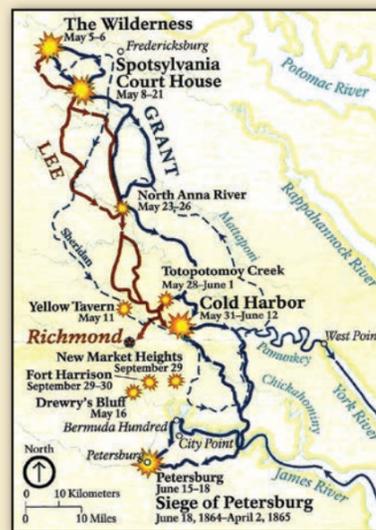


We picked a quantity of straw-berries, and as the [Shelton] family had no coffee, tea nor sugar, we procured some for them, and had a fine supper at a table, like civilized persons, for a novelty. The family were refined and educated, and were very affable when they found we 'Yankees' were civilized beings, and treated them kindly, but we found them rank rebels.

—Robert Robertson, Union staff officer (staff of Colonel Nelson Miles), May 30, 1864



1864 Overland Campaign



Ulysses S. Grant's 1864 Overland Campaign began with the Battle of the Wilderness and continued through Spotsylvania, North Anna, Totopotomoy Creek, Cold Harbor, and on to Petersburg. Unlike some earlier campaigns, this was part of a coordinated surge all across the South.

The Battle

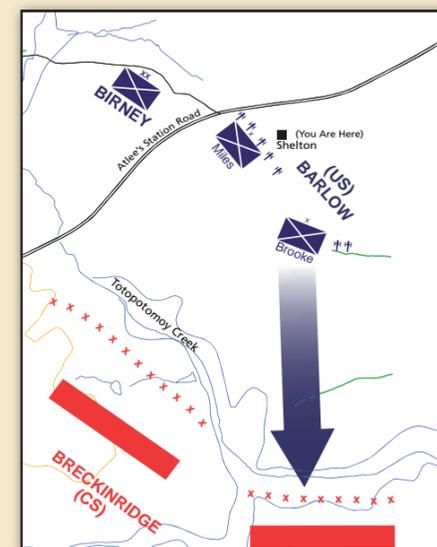
When the contending armies left the North Anna battlefield on May 27, 1864, they moved closer to Richmond. After crossing the Pamunkey River at two locations about five miles northeast of here, the Union army pushed forward on May 29 to the banks of Totopotomoy Creek. It found the Confederate army entrenched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



Generals Barlow, Hancock, Birney, and Gibbon in the field near Cold Harbor, Virginia, 1864. (Library of Congress)

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. Col. Edwin Shelton, her husband, was on the Confederate side of the creek and could not return. 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 Maj. Gen. Winfield S. Hancock, commander of the Second Corps, made his headquarters beneath the eastern porch of the house.

Late on May 30, Barlow's division attacked. Col. John R. Brooke's brigade pushed down the slope and across the creek in this vicinity 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



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

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.

Rural Plains

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 1723, the house remained in the Shelton family continuously for more than 280 years. The final generation of Sheltons sold the home and nearly 125 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.



Visit www.nps.gov/rich for information about special programs and events at Rural Plains and throughout Richmond National Battlefield Park.

Left: Fannie Shelton was one of several family members who stayed in the basement of the house during the battle. (NPS)

Above: The earliest known and previously unpublished view of Rural Plains is this May 1864 sketch by combat artist Alfred Waud. Park staff discovered the image in the collections of the Library of Congress.

Preserving the site's many resources and making them available to the public is a multi-layered and ongoing process. Emergency repairs to the house have stabilized it. Historic structures analysis and archeology continue to provide new information about the site's history. The National Park Service is honored to operate Rural Plains as a critical stop for anyone touring the 1864 Overland Campaign, bridging the frequently overlooked gap between the North Anna and Cold Harbor battlefields.

Following the Trail



Richmond National Battlefield Park maintains nearly 125 acres of battlefield landscape here.

This walking trail covers almost two miles roundtrip and visits some of the key sites. Each stop is marked by numbered posts in the ground. Historic markers  are in front of the house and near stop 5.

The trail can be shortened to approximately one mile by omitting stops 4 through 6 and turning left at the **T** after stop 3 to return to the house and parking area.

Where to Start

The tour begins in the open field just southwest of the house. From the parking area, pass by the white picket gate and follow the drive around to the other side of the house. Stop #1 is beyond the end of the hedge row to your left.

Below: From an upstairs window of the Shelton House, combat artist Alfred Waud documented the opening shots of the battle on May 29. This is a detail of his sketch which depicts the landscape before you as you approach Stop #1. (Library of Congress)



Stop #1 Totopotomoy Creek runs 650 yards in front of you, to the west. When the Union army arrived here on May 29, 1864, Confederate skirmishers fell back through these fields to their defenses beyond the creek. Northern soldiers immediately began to fortify. The following day a long line of artillery positions stretched through the yard of “Rural Plains,” the cannon dueling back and forth across the creek with their foes. The proximity of the guns to the main house helps explain why it was hit so many times by incoming Confederate fire.

Immediately to your right stood a cluster of houses occupied by the Shelton family slaves. Those buildings are visible on the left side of the sketch that can be seen on the front masthead of this brochure. During the battle one of the Union artillery limber chests, placed in the shelter of the buildings, exploded with tremendous violence, killing and wounding several Union soldiers. As you move south to Stop #2, you are walking parallel to the Union line of fortifications, most of which have disappeared.

Stop #2 A portion of the original Union defenses is visible here. The 2nd Corps brigade of Nelson Miles built this line, mostly on May 30, 1864. Lieutenant Robert Robertson, a Union staff officer, described this in his diary: “It was difficult to keep the men at work under the galling fire which the rebels kept up. They would cast up a shovel full of dirt and then lie down in the wheat until the bullets which the throwing up of the earth attracted had passed over, then resuming their labor. This delayed the work of intrenching until a bank had been thus raised high enough to afford a partial protection. . . .” The men of Miles’s brigade climbed over these entrenchments and moved toward the creek as part of the attack on May 31, eventually returning to this line later that day.

Stop #3 The family cemetery was here, between the opposing lines. This probably is where many generations of Sheltons were buried, perhaps stretching back into the 1700s. In 1952 the remains were removed to Hollywood Cemetery in Richmond. Two original headstones survive. Both are for infants who died in the 1850s, a boy and a girl, each of them

a grandchild of Colonel Edwin Shelton, the wartime owner of “Rural Plains.” The slave cemetery, undoubtedly somewhere on the property, has not yet been located.

Stop #4 A small line of entrenchments is visible here on either side of the trail, representing an advanced Union position, probably a line of skirmishers. The creek is 300 yards ahead. Most of this slope had no trees in 1864. The Union attacks of May 30 and May 31 both surged down this hill to the creek.

Stop #5 Confederate riflemen swept the valley of Totopotomoy Creek during the Union attacks here on May 30 and May 31. The hill actually is too steep for a truly effective defense, and on both days the blue-coated infantry managed to wade across the creek, scale the heights, and temporarily capture the opposite hill, driving off the defenders. It was a remarkable feat. Somewhere near here, on what he described as “that open, exposed slope,” the diarist Robert Robertson fell badly wounded while supervising part of the May 31 advance.

You are welcome to continue across the creek on the footbridge. That ground is not National Park Service property. There is a very steep trail, without any signs or numbered markers, but excellent examples of the Confederate entrenchments survive on the opposite side. The final stop on this walking tour (Stop #6) is back up the trail, closer to the house.

Stop #6 Because Totopotomoy Creek makes a 90 degree bend, so too did the Union defenses. Here they face south. Positions for more than a dozen cannon existed here; today only a small piece of the original line survives from what must have been a formidable sight in 1864. On the evening of May 30 those guns “commenced a deafening cannonade, and we at once advanced over the breastworks,” wrote Lieutenant Robertson. Darkness soon halted the advance. The following morning another attack began from here. This ground was open and treeless in 1864.

From here return to the main trail and continue north, back to the house and parking area.



 Historic Marker

Totopotomoy Creek Battlefield
at Rural Plains