

## CHAPTER 1

# Monday, May 5, and Tuesday, May 6, 1862

“[I]f there were troops at Fortress Monroe that could be spared, the movement should be made.”

— *Brig. Gen. Egbert L. Viele*

## EGBERT

Ludovicus Viele arrived outside the Washington Navy Yard after dark on May 5, 1862. Thanks to a strong spring shower, few people noticed. He was just another army officer in a city full of soldiers, albeit this officer was a brigadier general. Viele had returned the previous month from the Union’s successful capture of Fort Pulaski outside Savannah, Georgia, where the Confederate garrison had surrendered after an 18-hour bombardment.

Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton had asked the presently unattached brigadier earlier that day to come to the navy yard, but “with somewhat mysterious caution” urged him to tell no one where he was going. Stanton soon showed up and the war secretary and brigadier walked through the yard’s stockade down to the wharf, where the Treasury Department’s revenue cutter *Miami* was moored. “We went on board and proceeded at once to the cabin, where, to my surprise, I found the President and Mr. [Salmon P.] Chase, who had preceded us,” Viele recalled. The general soon learned he would be accompanying Abraham Lincoln, Stanton, and Treasury Secretary Chase on a trip to Fort Monroe, at the tip of the Virginia Peninsula. According to the president’s two cabinet secretaries, Lincoln’s trip, “so

Brig. Gen. Egbert L. Viele

*Library of Congress*

---



far as is known,” had the goal “to ascertain by personal observation whether some further vigilance and vigor might not be infused into the operations of the army at that point.”<sup>1</sup>

Lincoln needed to prod his overly cautious commander of the Army of the Potomac, Maj. Gen. George B. McClellan, into action along the Warwick River and at Yorktown. He also had to find a way to blunt the threat the CSS *Virginia*

posed to that campaign, as well as free up the Union fleet the Rebel ironclad had stymied at Hampton Roads.

The first task had taken care of itself just the day before when Confederate Gen. Joseph E. Johnston, the commander of the Confederate field army on the Virginia Peninsula, finally gave up the strong position at Yorktown that had delayed McClellan’s advance for 29 days. On May 5, McClellan wired Stanton that he had advanced up the Peninsula to Williamsburg. Though he complained that his army was “considerably inferior” to Gen. Johnston’s opposing force that was standing between him and Richmond, McClellan managed to advance into Williamsburg the next day after fighting a sharp action that drove back the Rebels.<sup>2</sup>

Now the president had to neutralize the CSS *Virginia*. There had been grumblings for some time about why Union forces hadn’t struck Norfolk and—

1 John G. Nicolay & John Hay, *Abraham Lincoln: A History*, 10 vols. (New York, 1890), 5:234. Egbert L. Viele, “A Trip with Lincoln, Chase and Stanton,” *Scribner’s Monthly* (October 1878), 16:813. The general pronounced his name Vee-lee. For more information, see Appendix I: Principal Biographic Vignettes.

2 McClellan to Stanton, May 5, 1862, U.S. Congress, *Report of the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War*, 3 vols. (Wilmington, NC, 1998), 1:324.

Secretary of War Edwin Stanton

*Library of Congress*

---



especially within the U.S. Navy—the Gosport Naval Yard, the *Virginia's* home base. That facility was considered the best of its kind in the country, and its loss on April 21, 1861, hurt both the war effort and the Navy's pride.<sup>3</sup>

On November 11, 1861, a young naval officer stationed on the USS *Cumberland* in Hampton Roads wrote the naval department outlining a plan to retake Norfolk and the naval yard.

Lt. Thomas O. Selfridge explained to Assistant Secretary of the Navy Gustavus V. Fox that 3,000 Union troops could be sent across the Roads to Sewell's Point while Federal vessels bombarded Rebel fortifications. From there, he continued, a second attack mounted across the mouth of the Elizabeth River to occupy Craney Island would deny access up the river to Norfolk, which would then fall easily. Selfridge claimed there was "nothing original" in his plan, "nothing which . . . has not been discussed elsewhere . . . I put them on paper from zeal, rather than to commit notoriety."<sup>4</sup>

Some in Congress were also growing impatient for action. At a hearing on December 24, 1861, in front of the Congressional Joint Committee on the Conduct

3 Edward P. Lull, *History of the United States Navy-Yard at Gosport, Virginia* (Washington, DC, 1874), 5, 33.

4 Thomas O. Selfridge to Gustavus V. Fox, November 11, 1861, in Robert Means Thompson & Richard Wainwright, eds., *Confidential Correspondence of Gustavus Vasa Fox, Assistant Secretary of the Navy, 1861-1865*, 2 vols. (New York, 1918), 1:397-400. The Confederate batteries at Sewell's Point and Craney Island would not be easy to storm from the waterside. A few days before Selfridge sent his letter, a *New York Herald* correspondent reported that the Rebels were "very busy at Sewell's Point," having mounted 20 large guns with more to come. "At Craney Island thirty-four bulldogs show their ugly muzzles. . . . With a proper force the rebels might be driven out by shell, but it would cost many lives and some vessels to do it." *Richmond Daily Dispatch*, Oct. 26, 1861, 3.

of the War, Brig. Gen. Samuel P. Heintzelman was asked, “Do you think that 50,000 men could not land near Lynnhaven Bay and pass over to Norfolk and hold that place?” Heintzelman, one of McClellan’s division commanders, had no answer to that question.<sup>5</sup>

On February 12, 1862, however, Brig. Gen. John G. Barnard, the Army’s chief engineer and designer of some of the capital’s fortifications, dismissed landing on the Atlantic Ocean side at Lynnhaven Bay as impractical. Without knowing the circumstances, Barnard reckoned “that the approach from Linnhaven Bay [sic]” had been discussed so widely “that I imagine the rebels’ most elaborate defences are on that side; besides the tributaries of ‘Turner’s Creek,’ and the Eastern Branch of the Elizabeth, so interlock that the defensive position is very strong.” Barnard also considered other routes to Norfolk: sailing directly up the Elizabeth River—requiring the batteries at Sewell’s Point and Craney Island to be taken first—or landing forces up the nearby Nansemond River to seize both Suffolk and Portsmouth to choke Norfolk off. He admitted he lacked the expertise to decide which plan would succeed.<sup>6</sup>

Louis M. Goldsborough, the flag officer commanding the North Atlantic Blockading Squadron based at Hampton Roads, didn’t see barriers that would stand in the war of Union success in that quarter. Possibly after talking with Lt. Selfridge, he advocated strong action. “Norfolk ought to be taken forthwith & the Navy Yard there totally destroyed,” he wrote Fox. “It can be done, either by starting a large force from here, or the neighborhood of Cape Henry [from the south] which is better, & taking all its defences in reverse.” The week before the *Virginia* attacked his ships off Newport News, Goldsborough urged Fox again. Having spent substantial time thinking about an attack on Norfolk, he’d become even more persuaded it would succeed, “& therefore, ought to be undertaken without delay. . . . That dock-yard at Norfolk is an infernally sore thing to us, & have it we must!!” Goldsborough estimated it would take more than 40,000 Federal soldiers to mount an invasion of Hampton Roads’ southern shore. Those men,

5 Samuel P. Heintzelman testimony, Dec. 24, 1861, *Report of the Joint Committee*, 1:120. Lynnhaven Bay is some 14 miles down the Virginia coast from Fort Monroe. A landing there would put Union troops about 17 miles due east of Norfolk.

6 John G. Barnard to Gustavus V. Fox, Feb. 12, 1862, in Thompson & Wainwright, eds., *Confidential Correspondence*, 1:422-29. Barnard, a veteran of the Mexican War and West Point graduate, spent his career as an engineering officer in the U.S. Army helping construct numerous forts along the coast. In 1855, he succeeded Robert E. Lee as superintendent of the United States Military Academy. At the start of the war, Barnard was put in charge of constructing the defenses around Washington.

however, were under McClellan's control, and "Little Mac" had other plans for their use on the Peninsula.<sup>7</sup>

The *Virginia's* stunning debut at the battle of Hampton Roads on March 8 increased pressure to act. Iowa Senator James W. Grimes claimed that twice in the months before the *Virginia's* appearance, Navy officers had urged opening the port. At one time, a fleet had been steamed up and ready to go to Norfolk, "but a superior military officer, who undertook to control all offensive operations, refused to let it go," Grimes claimed. On March 14, almost a week after the *Virginia's* exploits and the USS *Monitor's* timely arrival, Navy Secretary Gideon Welles told Stanton that taking Norfolk was "almost indispensable" to deny the Rebel ironclad a home port.<sup>8</sup>

On March 19, Gustavus Fox, Welles's assistant, testified to the Congressional Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War that "taking Norfolk has been talked over a great deal." The goal of Maj. Gen. Benjamin Butler's late May 1861 expedition to take Newport News was "the ultimate possession of Norfolk," Fox explained. The president had endorsed the plan and "believed that it could be done without any difficulty." Butler had written a memo in late May 1861 "setting forth the feasibility of capturing Norfolk."

The committee continued to probe. Fox didn't know why Norfolk had not been seized then, but the "panic" in Washington after the defeat at Bull Run the

7 Louis M. Goldsborough to Fox, Feb. 23 and Mar. 1, 1862, in *ibid.*, 243, 245-246. At the start of the war, captain was the highest official naval rank. To designate officers assigned to command more than one vessel (a fleet), the unofficial ranks of "commodore" or "flag officer" were created. The latter term related to the personal flag the commander would fly from his "headquarters" ship. On Feb. 18, 1862, Congressman Charles B. Sedgwick, chairman of the Committee on Naval Affairs, introduced a bill to recognize all unofficial naval titles and set all officer ranks as equivalent to corresponding U.S. Army ranks. The Senate eventually approved the bill and sent it to the president on July 15. Lincoln signed it the next day. The act replaced "flag officer" with "rear admiral," and recognized the top remaining ranks (in descending order) as commodore, captain, commander, lieutenant commander, and lieutenant. The rank of admiral was added later. The following year, the Confederate Congress also expanded its naval officer rankings to include admiral, vice admiral, rear admiral, commodore, etc. to match the changes made in the Union Navy. *Congressional Globe*, 37th Cong., 2nd sess. (1862), 583-87; U.S. Congress, *Journal of the Congress of the Confederate States of America, 1861-1865*, U.S. Senate Document no. 234, 58th Cong., 2nd sess., 6:131-35.

8 William Salter, *The Life of James W. Grimes, Governor of Iowa, 1854-1858; a Senator of the United States, 1859-1869* (New York, 1876), 171. James Wilson Grimes was first elected to the U.S. Senate as a Whig, but was instrumental in the creation of Iowa's Republican Party. While he was chairman of the Committee on the District of Columbia, Grimes had a strong interest in naval affairs and later became chairman of the Committee on Naval Affairs during the last year of Lincoln's presidency. Gideon Welles to Edwin Stanton, March 14, 1862, Lincoln Papers, Lincoln Studies Center (LSC).

previous July had “blocked this enterprise as it seemed to block every other . . . proposed elsewhere.” Butler had amassed some 11,000 troops for the seizure of Norfolk and was receiving more until “this panic here” brought his numbers down to 4,000–5,000. The same panic had “also put off [Flag Officer Samuel F.] Du Pont’s expedition two or three months. We could get no soldiers after that for any of our expeditions.”<sup>9</sup>

Others recognized the Union occupation of Newport News, where the James River entered Hampton Roads, as just the first step in recovering Norfolk, Portsmouth, and, most importantly, the Gosport Navy Yard. On June 26, *The South-Western* newspaper in far off Shreveport, Louisiana, reprinted a report that Butler had gone to Newport News “to superintend the erection of batteries there, and to survey the surrounding country” for other targets. Speculation arose that Butler meant to land his soldiers at Ocean View, Hampton Roads, ten miles from Norfolk and approach the town with “regular siege movements.”<sup>10</sup>

By mid-summer 1861, the Confederate press was reporting that additional Union troops were arriving at Fort Monroe. This could only mean an attack aimed at Gosport Navy Yard alone. The *Mobile Register* speculated that a feint by the Yankees toward Yorktown could induce Confederate troops to concentrate there to protect Richmond, but “the first thing you know [Butler] will be thundering with a powerful army at the gates of the Gosport Navy Yard.”<sup>11</sup>

Congress was still considering the issue on February 28, 1863, when the Joint Committee questioned McClellan about why he had not taken Norfolk in late 1861. Could not a force of 30–40,000 “have been concentrated suddenly at Fortress Monroe, and Norfolk captured and the *Merrimack* [Virginia] destroyed, without incurring any great hazard to us?” pressed the Committee. Possibly, McClellan responded, but it would have been difficult, plus he didn’t “think it would have promoted the general objects of the war.” Norfolk would have fallen anyway as “a

9 Gustavus V. Fox testimony, Mar. 19, 1862, *Report of the Joint Committee*, 3:417. Butler sent troops from Fort Monroe to occupy Newport News at the opposite side of the Peninsula on May 27, 1861. Two days later he outlined a plan to send soldiers from Newport News across the mouth of the James River to Pig Point and then to Suffolk, Va., which along with blockading the mouth of the Elizabeth River would render Norfolk “so perfectly hemmed in, that starvation will cause the surrender, without risking an attack on the strongly fortified entrenchments.” B. F. Butler, “Expedition to and Occupation of Newport News, Va.,” May 27, 1861, *OR* 2:52, 54.

10 Shreveport [LA] *South-Western*, June 26, 1861, 2. It is speculation whether the plan outlined as coming from Maj. Gen. Butler was known to Lincoln, Chase, and others almost a year later.

11 Pickens Court House [SC] *Keowee Courier*, July 20, 1861, 4.

necessary consequence” of his move against Richmond. But would not the destruction of the “*Merrimack*” have made “the movement upon Richmond, by way of the James or York rivers, very much more safe?” McClellan conceded the point, but noted that the formidable Federal vessels “*Congress* and *Cumberland* were [believed] capable of taking care of the *Merrimack*.” Taking Norfolk had been discussed after the destruction of those vessels, but it was thought “better not to depart from the direct movement upon Richmond.”<sup>12</sup>

By the spring of 1862, given the fear of what the CSS *Virginia* could do, experts predicted any attempt upon Norfolk would require thousands of soldiers and many ships. Fox told the congressional committee in mid-March he believed 15,000 Confederate soldiers to be in and near Norfolk. It would take many more Union troops to accomplish the job. As a result, Norfolk, Portsmouth, and the navy yard remained in Southern hands.<sup>13</sup>

Lincoln hoped to change that with his trip to Hampton Roads. Planning for the trip was left to Chase, a role he seemed to relish. In January his department had purchased the revenue ship to transport everyone, buying it for \$25,000 from New York merchant Arthur Leary. Built in Scotland in 1853, the *Lady Le Merchant* was a 115-foot, twin-engine, 213-ton screw steamer with 10 sails on double masts rigged as a schooner. With her teak planking and copper fastenings, the *Lady* sailed the transatlantic crossings with some style.<sup>14</sup>

Chase told his revenue collector in New York City to rename the steamer *Miami* after the Greater and Little Miami rivers in his home state of Ohio. Three guns—a 24-pounder, 12-pounder, and a pivot—were ordered for the ship, plus a new screw, fresh copper fastenings, and a few special amenities. She was carrying important people, after all, not going out on wartime duty. “Provide every particular necessary for comfort,” Chase instructed. “Bed, bedding, crockery, glassware, 2 or 3 spare beds and bedding for us if needed.” The *Miami*’s main cabin, according to Brig. Gen. Viele, “was one of the finest models” afloat. The ship, he admitted, was one of the “most neatly appointed vessels ever owned by the government.” He described the new revenue cutter as “neat and cozy [with a] center table, buffet and wash-stand, with four berths, two on each side and some comfortable chairs,” as well as a “shaded lamp suspended from the ceiling.” Additional comforts were added later—champagne glasses, plus silver or

12 McClellan testimony, Feb. 28, 1863, *Report of the Joint Committee*, 1:425.

13 Fox testimony, Mar. 19, 1862, *ibid.*, 3:420.

14 Florence Kern, *The U.S. Revenue Cutters of the Civil War* (Bethesda, MD, 2010), 88.



An Alfred Waud 1861 sketch of a United States revenue cutter, similar (or even identical) to the *Miami*. *Library of Congress*

silver-plated implements: a coffee urn, two silver teapots, a silver-plated nut-picker, and two silver-plated snuffers. She sported a 24-foot gig fitted with brass oar locks and cushions, a 22-foot launch, and two four-oared rowboats.<sup>15</sup>

Once outfitted and ready, with one of the best captains in the revenue service, Douglass Ottinger, in command, Chase ordered the *Miami* to the capital. She arrived on April 7 and immediately attracted attention from official Washington. Two days later Chase escorted fellow cabinet members Secretary of State William H. Seward and Stanton, as well as Washington Naval Yard commander John A. B. Dahlgren and some “ladies” on a short cruise down the Potomac River past Alexandria and back. The next day, other dignitaries, including Governor William Sprague of Rhode Island, took the same cruise. A couple of days after that, Seward returned with his wife and daughters and was soon joined by President Lincoln, his wife Mary, and their two surviving sons, Robert and Tad.<sup>16</sup>

The president sailed the *Miami* again on April 19 along with Chase, Stanton, Dahlgren, and a handful of Army and Navy officers on an official trip to Army

<sup>15</sup> Chase to Hiram Barney, Apr. 3, 1862, in Kern, *Revenue Cutters*, 88; Viele, “A Trip with Lincoln,” 813.

<sup>16</sup> Kern, *Revenue Cutters*, 88. Lincoln’s middle son Willie had died, likely of typhoid, on Feb. 20, 1862.



headquarters at Aquia Creek in Virginia. With the local department commander, Maj. Gen Irvin McDowell unavailable, the dignitaries encountered a *New York Herald* reporter “who knew everything.” From him they learned that McDowell had captured Fredericksburg, Virginia. While waiting for McDowell to report, Dahlgren said the group “had a gay evening in the little cabin, and then went to bed.” The next day, the general and other officers visited Lincoln on board. On May 2, Ottinger, three lieutenants, two engineers, and a crew of 34 revenue sailors prepared the *Miami* for another cruise. Gossip had it that Lincoln was getting ready to see military operations in person.<sup>17</sup>

Other important government officials were also sailing down the Potomac. The *Miami* made another quick trip on May 3 to Aquia Creek, taking Stanton along with Seward and Chase. They talked with McDowell and were back the following morning. “Notwithstanding this full representation by his Cabinet,” a *New York Times* reporter felt “authorized to say . . . that the President is not about to take the field in person.” He was wrong. All was in readiness Monday, May 5, for Lincoln to do just that. Amidst an early evening rain, the president, Chase, and Stanton, along with Brig. Gen. Viele boarded the ship.<sup>18</sup>

The *Miami* slipped down the Potomac River under a pouring rain and anchored for the night about 10:00 p.m. a short distance below Mt. Vernon to switch pilots. The president, Chase, Stanton, and Viele, meanwhile, made themselves comfortable with the treasury secretary playing the role of congenial host, displaying “those social amenities for which he was at all times, and under all circumstances, eminently distinguished.” Since the steamer belonged to the treasury department, Chase “treated us as if we were in his own house,” explained an impressed Viele.<sup>19</sup>

Following supper, the group got down to business. The men discussed the overall situation “long into the night,” reviewed the positions of the various armies in the field and the commanders’ reports, and voiced their opinions on what should be done. They also discussed “[m]any other topics, relevant and irrelevant . . . interspersed with the usual number of anecdotes from the never-failing supply with which the President’s mind was stored.”

17 Madeleine Vinton Dahlgren, ed., *Memoir of John A. Dahlgren, Rear-Admiral, U.S.N.* (Boston, 1882), 364. McDowell commanded the Department of the Rappahannock.

18 “News from Washington, Official Toward Yorktown,” *New York Times*, May 4, 1862, 8.

19 Viele, “A Trip with Lincoln,” 813.

Viele described the evening as an “interesting study” of the country’s leaders “relieved for the moment from the surroundings of their onerous official duties.” Lincoln, “of course,” was at the center of the group:

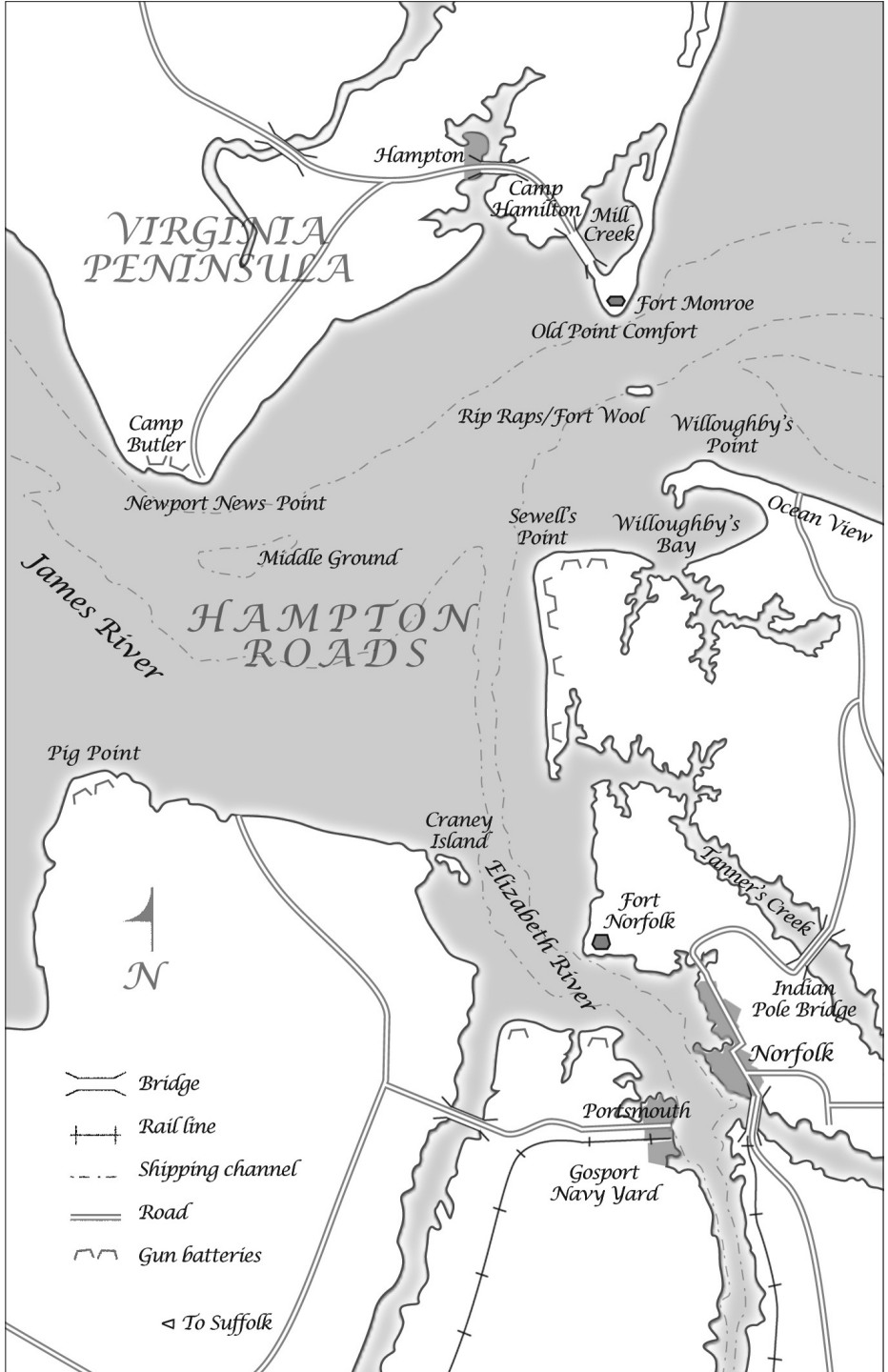
kind, genial, thoughtful, tender-hearted, magnanimous Abraham Lincoln! It was difficult to know him without knowing him intimately, for he was as guileless and single-hearted as a child; and no man ever knew him intimately who did not recognize and admire his great abilities, both natural and acquired, his large-heartedness and sincerity of purpose. . . . His inexhaustible stock of anecdotes gave to superficial minds the impression that he was not a thoughtful and reflecting man, whereas the fact was . . . the reverse. These anecdotes . . . came unbidden and like a forced smile were often employed to conceal a depth of anxiety in his own heart and to dissipate the care that weighed upon the minds of his associates.<sup>20</sup>

Lincoln’s longtime friend and confidant, Ward Hill Lamon, agreed with Viele. Years after the war, he described the president’s humor as “a plaster that heals many a wound,” though Lincoln admitted his stories were mostly second-hand. “I remember a good story when I hear it,” he said, “but I never invented anything original. I am only a retail-dealer.” His stories, Lamon continued, were often told with a well-defined purpose: to cheer the drooping spirits of a friend or to lighten the weight of his own melancholy (“a pinch, as it were, of mental snuff”); to clinch an argument; to expose a fallacy; to disarm an antagonist; but most frequently as simply “labor-saving contrivances.”<sup>21</sup>

After some time, the discussion turned to the group’s destination: Fort Monroe. Everyone studied a map of the Hampton Roads area spread across the table. Neither Lincoln nor Stanton had been there before, and the “conceptions they had formed of its location and topographical surroundings were quite inaccurate,” recalled Viele. Everyone, especially Chase and Viele, thought it reasonable that transporting troops south across the Roads from Fort Monroe would be easy. Norfolk could be taken. “I pointed out what I regarded as a feasible route to the rear of Norfolk from a point near Linn Haven [sic] Bay, opposite

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 813-14.

<sup>21</sup> Ward Hill Lamon, *Recollections of Abraham Lincoln*, Dorothy Lamon Teillard, ed. (Washington, 1911), 123-24. Lamon was Lincoln’s former law partner, friend, confidant, and protector, and not the only one who understood Lincoln’s penchant for humorous stories with himself often the object of the laughter. Wool’s aide Col. Le Grand B. Cannon came to know the president during his brief stay at Fort Monroe and concluded that Lincoln “was by nature an intensely sad man, and all his story-telling and humor was a mere shield to cover his real nature.” Le Grand B. Cannon, *Personal Reminiscences of the Rebellion, 1861-1866* (New York, 1895), 172.



Fortress Monroe,” Viele recalled, adding that he had advocated for just such an invasion the previous fall while waiting for the Port Royal expedition to start.<sup>22</sup>

Anticipating Lincoln’s wishes, on May 4 Stanton had telegraphed Maj. Gen. John E. Wool, Fort Monroe’s commander, asking “whether your force is in condition for a sudden movement if one should be ordered under your command.” Wool wired back the next day that his infantry was “ready to march with provisions, etc.” He also had a field battery ready along with several squadrons of dragoons. “If for sea service, there would be no delay,” wrote Wool. “If for land service, there may be some delay. The want of transportation might delay a day or two.”<sup>23</sup>

The presidential party left Washington before Wool’s reply arrived, so the question of having enough soldiers nagged the Union planners that evening as the *Miami* rode at anchor. Viele wrote that they eventually decided that, “if there were troops at Fortress Monroe that could be spared, the movement should be made.”<sup>24</sup>

Such a move required ships, and they belonged to the Navy. The naval planners, however, feared the *Virginia*, and Union leaders didn’t know what the Confederates were planning. Had they known, the group might have rested more easily when they finally decided to retire for the night.

\* \* \*

Not all was going well for the Confederates in Norfolk. Their abandonment of Yorktown and retreat toward Richmond, coupled with calls for soldiers to join the main army to defend the vital capital, threatened to leave Norfolk and the navy yard exposed. Union forces already controlled a long stretch of the James River’s north bank, effectively cutting off normal river communication between the capital and Norfolk.

Rumors of Norfolk’s abandonment had been floating around Richmond for days. John Beauchamp Jones, an observant and opinionated clerk working inside the Confederate War Department, heard those rumors in late April and again on

22 Viele, “A Trip with Lincoln,” 815.

23 Stanton to John E. Wool, May 4, 1862, OR 11/3:138; Wool to Stanton, May 5, 1862, John E. Wool Papers, New York State Archives. Maj. Gen. Wool sent two more messages to Secretary Stanton later the same day, both stating his soldiers were ready, except for the lack of transport horses, for which he blamed McClellan, who had taken most of them for the Peninsula campaign.

24 Viele, “A Trip with Lincoln,” 815.

May 3. They gradually became more definitive. On May 6 and 7, he confided to his diary, “We have not yet reached the lowest round of the ladder. The [War] Secretary is at Norfolk, and the place is to be evacuated. I would resign first,” he added.<sup>25</sup>

In addition to the threat of McClellan’s army moving toward Richmond, and its attendant exposure of Norfolk, danger also lurked from the south, with Federal troops under Maj. Gen. Ambrose Burnside only 30 miles away at the southern end of the Chesapeake & Albemarle Canal. Those troops could reach Norfolk by marching up the canal through the Dismal Swamp to the Elizabeth River, or they might swing east and advance northward, marching on land between the swamp and the Atlantic. Still, many Confederates clung to the hope that Norfolk would remain in Southern hands—a hope that rested upon the strength of the *Virginia’s* iron sides.

Maj. Gen. John B. Magruder, who had been in command on the lower Virginia Peninsula at Yorktown until superseded by the arrival of Gen. Joe Johnston on April 17, thought that the changed circumstances had released the “*Virginia* . . . from the inaction that she has necessarily remained in for the last month.” On May 5, he told Secretary of War George W. Randolph, “[a]ll that the *Virginia* can effect in the Roads is the protection of Norfolk and the James River. The former object is not now a controlling one, as I understand Norfolk is, or is to be, evacuated.”<sup>26</sup>

Magruder further opined that the *Virginia’s* other job—keeping Union ships from going up the James River—could not be fully accomplished as some boats might slip by at night. Moreover, he added, the Rebel retreat had given the enemy “command of the left bank of the river from the Chickahominy down,” which the Confederates couldn’t protect to that extent. Keeping “the *Virginia* at the mouth of the James River” wasn’t urgent enough “to occupy the attention of the last naval hope we have.”

Instead, Magruder suggested—as had others many times since the *Virginia* was first ready for action—that the ironclad be sent past the Union fleet and Fort Monroe to the other side of the Peninsula and up the York River, there to wreak havoc with the Union transports supporting McClellan’s Army of the Potomac. Confederate Secretary of the Navy Stephen Mallory had repeatedly rejected this

25 John Beauchamp Jones, *A Rebel War Clerk’s Diary at the Confederate States Capital*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia, 1866), 1:123.

26 Mallory to Sydney Smith Lee, Mar. 26, 1862, ORN 7:751. Confederate Secretary of the Navy Stephen R. Mallory, back on March 26, had confidentially ordered the navy yard’s commander to begin packing up machinery and tools for an evacuation.

suggestion as impractical. Even Randolph thought the *Virginia* needed to stay where she was. Her position “at the mouth of the James River . . . adds materially to the defenses of Richmond,” he explained, “besides giving us a chance to move the material from the navy-yard up [the] James River.”<sup>27</sup>

Reflecting Randolph’s views, and possibly those of Confederate President Jefferson Davis, Mallory wired the *Virginia*’s commander, Flag Officer Josiah Tattnall, to reiterate that the ironclad’s mission was to protect the entrance to the James River against a Union naval incursion. “We look to the *Virginia* alone to [do this],” he emphasized. “Her presence in the river is of vital importance.”<sup>28</sup>

Placing the *Virginia* at the mouth of the James, however, didn’t protect Norfolk. That job responsibility rested on Maj. Gen. Benjamin Huger, who was busy organizing the city’s military evacuation. Apparently, Huger heard of Mallory’s order to Tattnall and complained to Tattnall about it. “[T]he order was imperative,” Tattnall responded. “I must execute it.” Perhaps Huger should telegraph Mallory “and state the consequences.” Mallory soon relented and agreed the *Virginia* also needed to guard the river approach to Norfolk. If not, Craney Island and Sewell’s Point would have to be abandoned. In another message the following morning, he reiterated his wish “to afford protection to Norfolk, as well as to [the] James River.”<sup>29</sup>

With orders to protect both the James River and Norfolk while taking orders from army commanders whose authority over a naval officer like himself he questioned, Tattnall felt as if he was in an untenable position. His objections soon became widely known. The rumor mill was in full-out operation. “A vague report has been in circulation here for some days . . . that Commodore Tattnall had resigned from the Navy, on the grounds of an attempt to subject him to the orders of General [Joseph E.] Johnston, of the Army,” reported the Atlanta *Southern Confederacy* on May 8. The paper went on to discredit the report, since the *Virginia* reported herself “at anchor opposite the Naval Hospital, with a prospect of active service during the present week.”<sup>30</sup>

The purpose of keeping the *Virginia* in a position to hold off any Union attempt to take Norfolk, however, was not so the city remained in Confederate

27 Magruder to Randolph, May 5, 1862, and Randolph’s endorsement, OR 11/3:494-95.

28 Mallory to Josiah Tattnall, May 5, 1862, ORN 7:785.

29 Josiah Tattnall, “Report of Flag-Officer Tattnall, C. S. Navy,” May 14, 1862, & Mallory to Tattnall, May 6, 1862, ORN 7:335, 785.

30 Atlanta *Southern Confederacy*, May 8, 1862, 3.

hands, but to secure the ongoing military evacuation. “General preparing to march, packing up, fixing up tents,” wrote a Confederate private on May 6 in describing the scene at Camp Jackson outside Norfolk. “Appeared at dress parade with sack and pack.”<sup>31</sup>

The previous day, the *Southern Confederacy* published a report from a “special correspondent from near Norfolk” that the city “is to be evacuated at last . . . Lincoln will soon have control of every city in the Confederate States that can be approached by water.” The reporter went on to note that when the secretaries of war and of the navy visited the Norfolk area the previous week, they “examined everything, and, from all appearances . . . decided to give up Norfolk and fall back toward Richmond. They have commenced removing stores and ammunition, and the machinery out of the Navy Yard. Everything is now rearward from Sewell’s Point.”

The paper’s correspondent cited further evidence of the evacuation: “Yesterday a party passed down . . . with axes destroying every boat on the Elizabeth [River] both large and small, to prevent any negro or Unionist from going over to [Fort Monroe], to give the enemy information [about] the evacuation.” An imminent attack seemed probable. “A bottle floated ashore here last Friday containing a note, signed, ‘Confederate Prisoner at the Rip Raps,’ saying the enemy was preparing to attack Norfolk on the 10th with three iron-clad boats,” continued the reporter, who concluded, however, that “The darkest hour has not yet come. Do not despair. Daylight, bright and calm, will surely follow.”<sup>32</sup>

The pending evacuation also affected the fledgling Confederate navy. Lt. William Harwar Parker, the gunboat *Beaufort’s* former commander, watched in frustration as ships were ordered to move up the James River. The gunboat slated to be his new command sat unfinished at the Gosport Naval Yard. Writing after the war, he recalled that he had begun hearing about the “probable evacuation of Norfolk” during the first part of May:

The *Patrick Henry*, *Jamestown*, *Teaser*, *Beaufort* and *Raleigh* were sent up the James River to operate on the right flank of General Magruder’s army, then falling back in the direction of Richmond. The *Nansemond* and *Hampton*, two gunboats built at the navy yard, were completed . . . and sent to Richmond. Rutledge [who also had a new gunboat under

31 Louis Merz, May 6, 1862, “Diary of Private Louis Merz, C.S.A., of the West Point Guards,” *Chattahoochee Valley Historical Society Bulletin*, 4 (1959), 35.

32 Atlanta *Southern Confederacy*, May 11, 1862, 3.

construction] and I did our best to get our vessels ready [to move,] but the engines were not prepared and there was nothing left at the yard to tow us up.<sup>33</sup>

Despite the chaotic evacuation, on May 5 Tattall defiantly showed the flag to make it clear to the Yankees on the other side of Hampton Roads who still held the southern shore. The *Virginia* steamed “around Sewall’s [sic] Point for two hours [and then] returned to Craney Island, without exchanging a shot,” reported the *New York Times*. She was in sight when a Confederate schooner carrying 60 tons of coal for the ironclad ran aground along the southern shore of the James near Newport News. While the schooner’s crew took to their boats, several boatloads of Union soldiers tried unsuccessfully to tow the schooner to the northern side of the river, so “[t]hey set her on fire.” The *Virginia* made no move to assist the stricken vessel.<sup>34</sup>

\* \* \*

Unaware of any of these events, Lincoln’s party aboard the anchored *Miami* prepared to get some sleep. “The driving rain outside only served to make our little cabin seem more cozy,” thought Viele. “The President’s berth was on the same side of the cabin with mine, and he suggested that, as I had more room than I required and he had not enough, a movable partition would have been a great convenience.” He went on to recommend that Secretary Chase should “provide some arrangement of this kind, in case we took another such trip.”<sup>35</sup>

When the party woke the next morning the ship was well on her way, having resumed the journey downriver at 3:00 a.m. The *Miami’s* captain ordered sails only as the revenue cutter made 10 knots, pushed along by a strong northwest wind.<sup>36</sup>

According to Viele, the time “was spent principally upon the quarter-deck, and the President entertained us with numerous anecdotes and incidents of his life, of the most interesting character.” Lincoln also displayed his physical strength:

While we were sitting on deck, he saw an ax in a socket on the bulwarks, and taking it up, held it at arm’s length at the extremity of the helve with his thumb and forefinger, continuing to hold it there for a number of minutes. The most powerful sailors on board

33 William Harwar Parker, *Recollections of a Naval Officer, 1841-1865* (New York, 1883), 278.

34 *New York Times*, May 6, 1862, 1; *Philadelphia Press*, May 7, 1862, 2.

35 Viele, “A Trip with Lincoln,” 815.

36 Kern, *Revenue Cutters*, 89.



tried in vain to imitate him. Mr. Lincoln said he could do this when he was eighteen years of age, and had never seen a day since that time when he could not.<sup>37</sup>

Viele's reading of "an amusing rhyme" from *Harper's Weekly* entertained Lincoln "exceedingly." The president liked it so much he wanted to save it. "Instead of requesting me to cut it out for him," Viele explained, "he borrowed my knife, and extending himself at half length on the deck, spread the paper before him and cut the piece out, remarking at the time that it was not precisely the attitude for the President of the United States to assume, but it was a good position for a man who merely wanted to cut a piece out of a paper."<sup>38</sup>

While still descending the Potomac River, the *Miami* passed a mile-long row of barges laden with stones. Of the barges tied up along the riverbank, Lincoln joked, "Oh! That is Stanton's navy; that is the squadron that Welles would have nothing to do with. . . . It was finally decided, I believe," he continued, "that the War Department might have a fleet of its own to fight the *Merrimac*, and there it is." Secretary Stanton, who was out on the *Miami's* deck with the rest of the party, felt "a little disconcerted by the President's levity" and insisted it was best to prepare for the possibility that the *Virginia* could attempt to come up the Potomac to the capital city.<sup>39</sup>

Lincoln couldn't resist poking additional fun at the ruffled leader of the war department. "Your emergency," he replied,

reminds me of a circumstance which took place in Illinois. We had on our circuit a respectable lawyer named B—, noted for a remarkable development of his breast, the glands being enormous, more protuberent [sic] than those of many females. In a conversation which took place among the lawyers at one of the hotels, there was a discussion regarding the singular development which, in a man, was almost a deformity, and could be of no possible use. B— controverted this, and said that, supposing he were to be cast away upon an uninhabited island, with no other human being but a nursing infant, for which he would have to provide. In such an emergency, he had no doubt Providence would furnish, through him, nourishment for the child.

He said this, continued the president,

37 Viele, "A Trip with Lincoln," 816.

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid.

with as much apparent sincerity as Stanton showed when he urged a navy composed of canal boats to stop the *Merrimac*. I think B—'s paps to nurse an infant will be as serviceable, and required about as soon as Stanton's fleet to fight and keep back an iron frigate. The preparation for an anticipated emergency, which is about as likely to occur in one case as the other, is very striking.<sup>40</sup>

By noon the ship had left the Potomac, sailed past Point Lookout, Maryland, and entered the large expanse of Chesapeake Bay. With the cutter "tossing" on the waves, the party returned to the cabin to have something to eat. "It would have amused you to see us take our luncheon," Chase wrote his daughter the next day. "The President gave it up almost as soon as he began, & declaring himself too uncomfortable to eat, stretched himself at length on the locker. The rest of us persisted; but the plates slipped this way and that—the glasses tumbled over & slid and rolled about—and the whole table seemed as topsy-turvy as if some Spiritualist were operating upon it."<sup>41</sup>

Later in the afternoon, when the wind slackened, Capt. Ottinger called all hands to quarters for the firing of the ship's guns. The president and others sat under an awning on deck to watch the exciting event.<sup>42</sup>

The *Miami* eventually reached Old Point Comfort, at the tip of the Virginia Peninsula, between 8:00-9:00 p.m. and sailed around to Fort Monroe on the south side of the Point. The masonry fort was separated from the mainland by a small bay, connected to land by only a thin natural causeway and a narrow bridge.

"The outlines of the grand old fortress were dimly visible along the horizon as we approached," Viele wrote, "surrounded by a cordon of floating vedettes whose thousand lights glimmered like stars in the mirrored surface." The brigadier listed

40 Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles retold this story many time after the war, adding, "Mr. Chase related to me this incident, which was afterwards, at his request, repeated by the President in the presence of others, to the great annoyance of Mr. Stanton, who never enjoyed the anecdotal [sic] humors of the President if at his expense." Welles, "The First Iron-Clad Monitor," in McClure, ed., *The Annals of the War Written by Leading Participants North and South*, 29-30.

41 Chase to "Nettie," May 7, 1862, in "Diary, July 21-Oct. 12, 1862," Salmon P. Chase Papers, Library of Congress. Chase wrote three letters to his daughter Janet (nicknamed "Nettie") dated May 7, 8, and 11, 1862. The letters, later transcribed in his diary, used many abbreviations, which are spelled out in this text. "The Life of Chase: His Account of the Capture of Norfolk," *New York Times*, Sept. 10, 1874, 4, partially reproduces a couple of the letters. Parts of all three letters also can be found in David Donald, ed., *Inside Lincoln's Cabinet: The Civil War Diaries of Salmon P. Chase* (New York, 1954).

42 Kern, *Revenue Cutters*, 89.

Maj. Gen. John E. Wool,  
commander of Fort Monroe and vicinity.

*Library of Congress*

all manner of ships and boats floating in the waters near the fort, including ocean steamers, river steamers, sloops, transports, brigs, canal boats, harbor tugs, men-of-war, gunboats, iron-plated batteries, and “countless smaller craft.” Finally, “[t]owering above them all was the *Vanderbilt*, that leviathan of ocean steamers, a million-dollar gift by the owner to the government.”<sup>43</sup>

As the *Miami* pulled up to the wharf, Stanton sent a message alerting Maj. Gen. John Wool, the fort’s commander, of the president’s arrival. Amazingly, the fort had not been informed that Lincoln was

coming. Wool’s aide, Col. Le Grand B. Cannon, came aboard first and quickly suggested that the party retire to headquarters within the fort. Wool and his staff arrived soon thereafter to escort the distinguished visitors. By this time it was about 10:00 p.m.<sup>44</sup>

Apparently, and while still aboard the *Miami*, Lincoln brought up the prospect of taking Norfolk. Wool readily agreed with the idea, recalled Cannon, but the presence of the formidable *Virginia* lurking in the southern Hampton Roads waters invited disaster for soldiers sent over to do so on wooden transports. The Navy’s cooperation would be imperative. It would have to neutralize the *Virginia* first.<sup>45</sup>



43 Viele, “A Trip with Lincoln,” 818.

44 Cannon, *Personal Reminiscences*, 153-54; Chase to “Nettie,” May 7, 1862, 48.

45 Cannon, *Personal Reminiscences*, 154.

“If you will order the navy to co-operate with me,” Wool explained to Lincoln, “I will take Norfolk in three days.” There was reason to have faith in Wool’s pronouncement. Although at 78 he was the oldest officer in service, Wool (who was still fit enough to ride a horse) had a long record of accomplishments that stretched back to the War of 1812, when as a young attorney he volunteered to fight and never returned to private life.

The president, who was well aware of Wool’s storied history, responded by telling the aging general that they needed to talk with the area naval commander, Flag Officer Goldsborough. As it happened, Goldsborough’s headquarters was on the USS *Minnesota*, a powerful frigate anchored out in Hampton Roads. Despite the late hour, it was quickly determined that the president, Secretaries Stanton and Chase, and Gens. Wool and Viele should immediately confer with Goldsborough. The party rode a tugboat out to the *Minnesota* and climbed to the ship’s main deck via a set of narrow steps flanked by guide ropes. It was, admitted Chase, “very high & a little fearsome.”

Goldsborough was hardly enthused about taking on the *Virginia* to secure safe passage for troops. The plan meant risking the *Monitor* in another fight with her nemesis. Lt. Col. Thomas J. Cram of Wool’s staff, who created the map Lincoln had studied the night before, also pointed out the dearth of good landing spots on the south side of Hampton Roads. Shallow water prevented transport tugs from getting close enough to disembark troops safely. The plan included a discussion about how to draw the *Virginia* into open water so the *Vanderbilt* or the *Minnesota* could ram her.<sup>46</sup>

Given the late hour (sometime after 1:00 a.m.), it is unclear whether the president and his party remained on the *Minnesota* as Goldsborough’s guests or returned to the *Miami*. In all likelihood, the exhausted visitors returned to the comfort of their own ship.

46 Chase to “Nettie,” May 7, 1862, 48-49; Cannon, *Personal Reminiscences*, 154. Goldsborough became commander of the North Atlantic Blockading Squadron on Sept. 23, 1861. On Oct. 12, his operational area was divided between northern and southern commands, north and south of the Carolina borders. Goldsborough retained command of the northern squadron, while Samuel F. Du Pont took over the southern one. *Civil War Naval Chronology*, 6:27.