May 24, 1861, was not a great day for the city of Alexandria. Less than twenty-four hours after the citizens of Virginia had voted to ratify the Ordinance of Secession, Union troops invaded the bustling port city of some 12,000 residents—and stayed for the remainder of the war. That’s why even today some people in Richmond refer to Alexandria and its environs as “Occupied Northern Virginia.”

The invasion began at two in the morning when Union soldiers crossed over the Chain Bridge and the Long Bridge (today’s 14th Street Bridge) from Washington to take over Northern Virginia. The invading force included six companies of District Volunteers; one Michigan, five New York and two New Jersey regiments; a two-gun artillery battery; and a company of U.S. Cavalry. Other Union troops arrived at the Alexandria wharfs aboard three steamships, guarded by two USS Pawnee launches. There was no resistance as six companies of 1st Michigan Regiment under Col. Orlando B. Willcox and the 11th New York Zouave Regiment led by Col. Elmer Ellsworth entered Alexandria.

The Union command had been concerned since Fort Sumter had fallen on April 13 about a Confederate attack on Washington. That city’s residents had been startled to see Confederate flags flying in northern Virginia from high points in the city within days after the Union surrender at Fort Sumter. Federal troops immediately were rushed into Washington, and within months the Union began building what became known as the Defenses of Washington, a series of sixty-seven connected forts and fortifications that rang the city like a beltway.

Several of those forts would be built in Northern Virginia, so the next logical step was to secure the southern environs of the national capital, including Alexandria.

Although a significant number of Alexandrians were Union sympathizers, the overwhelming majority in the city supported the Southern cause, as evidenced by the reaction to the invasion by one Henry B. Whittington, a clerk for an Alexandria mercantile business.

“The first instalment [sic] of federal troops,” Whittington wrote in the first entry of his Civil War diary, “made their advent into our city as the advance guard of the northern army intended to subjugate the people of the South to the control of one Abraham Lincoln, the first sectional President ever elected by the people of the American Union.”

As Whittington and others noted, the Virginia militia troops in Alexandria had left hours before the Union troops crossed the Potomac rather than risk a bloody and destructive showdown in the city. “The Virginia forces under Col. Terrett having evacuated the place,” Whittington wrote, “the invaders of course met with no resistance; but the frown of the citizens gave unerring indication of their feelings, in view of this infringement upon their rights….“

In the days and weeks before the invasion most of the city’s businesses had closed and many residents fled the city. Slaves who were not taken with their fleeing owners were sent to the city jail. All in all, some two-thirds of the city’s residents left town by May 24 rather than live under Union control.

That day “rose bright and lovely as any May morning ever dawned upon the earth,” Anne Frobel, who lived with her sister on a farm on Old Fairfax Road (now Franconia Road.), wrote in her diary on May 24. “The turnpike road, and all the roads as far as we could see were filled with vehicles of all sorts and description, filled with women and children and goods of all kinds,
men on horseback and on foot, a continual stream. Old Fairfax surely never knew such commotion before.”

Earlier in May, the sisters rode into Alexandria “to see and hear all we could,” Anne Frobel wrote. “Such a dense crowd thronged the streets, carriages filled with people, wagons, carts, drays, wheelbarrows all packed mountain high with baggage of every sort—men, women, and children streaming along to the cars, most of the women crying, almost every face we saw we recognized and all looking as forlorn as if going to execution.”

Frobel said that she thought that “every body from both town and country that could possibly get away left at this time, and for the first time, it dawned upon me that it was something more than pastime and O what a feeling of loneliness and utter despair came over us when we thought of every friend and acquaintance gone…” 3

“Our friends and neighbors have left us,” Judith B. McGuire, the wife of the Headmaster of Episcopal High School (known then as “High School”) wrote in her dairy two and a half weeks before the invasion. “The Theological Seminary is closed; the High School dismissed.... Scarcely any one is left of the many families which surrounded it. We are left lonely indeed; our children are all gone—the girls to Clarke where they may be safer…and the boys, the dear, dear boys, to the camp to be drilled and prepared to meet any emergency. Can it be that our country is to be carried on and on to the horrors of Civil War?” 4

The Confederate Flag

Before the horror started in earnest, the otherwise non-violent Union invasion of Alexandria turned deadly when Col. Elmer Ellsworth was shot and killed at the Marshall House Hotel by its proprietor, the Confederate partisan James Jackson. The Death of Ellsworth—as the demise of the first Union officer killed in the Civil War became known in the North—was tied directly to the Stars and Bars, the newly adopted flag of the Confederate States of America.

Which is a telling indicator that the Civil War ushered in a significant change in Americans’ (North and South) feelings for the national flag. The fact is that the reverent feelings that 21st century Americans have for our national flag date not from the Revolutionary War, but from 1861 and the start of the Civil War. Before the Civil War—for the first three-quarters of this nation’s history, in fact—it was almost unheard of for private individuals to fly the American flag. 5 Until 1861, the flag was flown almost exclusively at federal facilities and by the American military, primarily on U.S. Navy ships. Contrary to images promulgated well after the fact, the Continental Army did not officially fight under the Stars and Stripes against the British, and the U.S. military did not officially adopt the Stars and Stripes until the early 1840s.

It was not until the fall of Fort Sumter in 1861 that the American flag began to take on something approaching its current meaning to the American public. Soon after that fort fell to the Confederates, northerners began displaying the flag ubiquitously as a symbol of the fight to keep the union intact.

And—not surprisingly with the nation involved in a bitterly contentious shooting Civil War—the flag and the Confederate flag were involved in violent, sometimes deadly incidents. Southern sympathizers in the North risked mob violence if they displayed the Confederate flag publicly. The same was true for northern patriots in the South. In some cases, mobs in the North carried out attacks against individuals and business that failed to fly the Stars and Stripes.

The first fatal incident during a Civil War engagement involving a flag took place on the day of the Union invasion of Alexandria, May 24, 1861. Twenty-four-year-old Elmer Ellsworth, a native of the small upstate New York State village of Malta in Saratoga County, was marching a small detachment of his Zouave regiment down King Street on their way to the telegraph office. As they did so, Ellsworth noticed that the Marshall House was flying a large, sixteen-by-thirty-foot, Confederate Stars and Bars from its roof.

Proprietor James W. Jackson had raised that flag the night before in front of a large crowd that had gathered there to cheer the vote for secession. Jackson, a staunch Confederate supporter, had moved to Alexandria in January to reopen the Marshall House, which was more of what we would consider a boarding house than an inn.

Ellsworth had gained national fame in 1859-60 as the founder and leader of United States Zouave Cadets of Chicago, a group of young men recruited from the Illinois State Militia that specialized in close-order drills. 6 The cadets wore flamboyant uniforms that Ellsworth designed featuring fezzes, balloon pants, and red vests, and they performed in front of large, adoring crowds in cities and towns from Chicago to New York.

At that time Ellsworth was “the most talked-of man in the country,” the Atlantic Monthly magazine noted. “His pictures sold like wildfire in every city in the land. School-girls dreamed over the graceful wave of his curls, and shop-boys tried to reproduce the Grand Seigneur air of his attitude…. The leading journals spoke editorially of him and the comic papers caricatured his drill.” 7

The name “Zouave” came from a regiment of the French colonial army made up of fierce warriors from the Kabylı tribe that lived in the hills of Algeria and Morocco. The French Zouaves made their reputation during the Crimean War of 1854-56. During the American Civil War, American Zouave units fought on both sides of the conflict.
“The dashing young commander,” as The New York Times referred to Ellsworth, had met and befriended Abraham Lincoln in Springfield, Illinois, in 1859, after Lincoln had attended a Zouave performance. The next year, after the group had disbanded, Ellsworth moved to Springfield and went to work in Lincoln’s law office. Three days after Fort Sumter fell in March of 1861, Ellsworth arrived in New York City where he recruited 1,100 men for his 11th New York Regiment, nicknamed the Fire Zouaves because many of the men were New York City firemen.

During the time the Regiment stayed in Washington, from early May until they moved into Northern Virginia on May 24, Ellsworth spent considerable amounts of time at the White House where he visited with the President and Mrs. Lincoln, hobnobbed with the Presidents’ secretaries John Hay and John Nicolay and other White House staffers, and played games with the two Lincoln children, Willie and Tad.

On May 24, Ellsworth, resplendent in his Zouave uniform, entered the Marshall House with five of his men—one of whom was the unit’s chaplain, and one of whom (Henry J. Wisner) was the regimental secretary. The newspaper correspondent Edward H. House of the New York Tribune also was part of the group. As they entered the inn, Ellsworth ordered one of his men to stay at the front door, one to keep watch on the first floor landing and one at the foot of the stairs.

Ellsworth, House, Wismer, the chaplain and Corp. Frank Brownell charged up the stairs, climbed up onto the roof, and removed the flag. Ellsworth had the large flag draped over his shoulder as they were coming down the stairs when Jackson appeared in the stairwell with a double-barreled shotgun.

Jackson “had always said that the Confederate flag which floated from the top of his house should never be taken down but over his dead body,” Judith McGuire wrote in her diary. “It was known that he was a devoted patriot, but his friends had amused themselves at his rash speech.”

As Ellsworth passed Jackson, McGuire wrote, “He said, ‘I have a trophy.’ Jackson immediately raised his gun, and in an instant Ellsworth fell dead. One of the party [Brownell] immediately killed poor Jackson... Jackson leaves a wife and children. I know the country will take care of them. He is the first martyr. I shudder to think how many more there may be.”

A “general expression of joy was manifested by our most quiet citizens” when word got out that Jackson had killed Ellsworth, Henry Whittington wrote in his diary the next day. “The proprietor of the Marshall House, heartily sympathizing with the South in the unnatural contest to which she had been forced by the unscrupulous partisans of the North, had procured a Confederate States flag and had placed it upon his building, avowing that whoever should attempt to remove it, would have to pass over his dead body, and the sequel shows the melancholy fulfillment of this pledge as he fell mortally wounded in its defense, but not til he had accomplished the death of him who dared thus to invade the sanctity of his home.”

Whittington called it “a sad day for Alexandria.” This “unprecedented move upon the part of a Republican President will ever linger in the minds of citizens while memory lasts,” he said, “for independent of the regrets experienced at the death of the brave and patriotic Jackson, the usurpations of power indicated by this movement causes the hearts of freemen to shrink with dread from the contemplation of the future history of our beloved country.”

That was the southern point of view. In Washington, D.C., and points north the martyrdom was on the other side. Abraham Lincoln was devastated by the news of his friend’s death. He reportedly cried in public for the first and only time when word reached him that Ellsworth had been shot dead in Alexandria.

Brownell described the scene in Washington when Lincoln sent for him to explain what had happened. “Mr. Lincoln was walking up and down the floor very much agitated. He was wringing his hands, and there was, I thought, the trace of tears upon his cheek. He did not appear to notice my entrance at first. Lifting the cloth from the face of the dead man, he exclaimed, with a depth
of pathos I shall never forget: ‘My boy, my boy! Was it necessary this sacrifice should be made?’”\(^{10}\)

After recovering from the shock, Lincoln found some comfort in what occurred after the killings. “There is one fact that has reached me which is a great consolation to my heart and quite a relief after this melancholy affair,” Lincoln told a group of White House visitors, including a reporter from the *New York Herald*.

“I learn from several persons that when the Stars and Stripes were raised again in Alexandria, many of the people of the town actually wept for joy, and manifested the liveliest gratification at seeing this familiar and loved emblem once more floating about them.”

Lincoln ordered that Ellsworth lay in state in the East Room of the White House where thousands came to pay their respects. Later, the casket was displayed at City Hall in New York City, where more thousands showed up to mourn. Ellsworth was buried in Mechanicsville, New York, near where he was born.

As the news of what became known as “The Marshall House Incident” spread -- mainly through an illustrated, cover story in the June 15, 1861, issue of *Harper’s Weekly* -- Ellsworth was mourned throughout the North and became the Union’s first Civil War martyr.

Men by the hundreds, perhaps by the thousands, joined the Union Army when they heard the news. Babies were named for him. Streets and towns in the North were renamed for him. Poems and songs were written in his honor. Several regiments adopted the Zouave name in his honor, including the 44th New York Volunteer Infantry, which became known as “Ellsworth’s Avengers,” and Union troops took up the battle cry, “Avenge Ellsworth.”

Ellsworth’s image appeared on stationary (see page 15), sheet music, and in memorial lithographs. One envelope pictured Ellsworth attired in an idealized Zouave uniform holding a rifle and a large American flag. Above him were the words, “To Richmond,” and below the words, “Remember Ellsworth.”

The bloody Confederate flag that Ellsworth clutched in his hands was conveyed to the White House where Mary Todd Lincoln hid it away in a drawer. Tad Lincoln, the President’s son, enjoyed playing with the flag and sometimes would wave it during official occasions.

“When the President was reviewing some troops from the portico of the White House, Tad sneaked this flag out and waved it back of the President, who stood with a flag in his hands,” Julia Taft Bayne, a playmate of Tad’s, remembered. “The sight of a rebel flag on such an occasion caused some commotion, and when the President saw what was happening he pinioned his bad boy and the flag in his strong arms and handed them together to an orderly, who carried the offenders within.”\(^{11}\)

Brownell was awarded a Medal of Honor in 1877 for his actions in Alexandria on May 24, 1861. The coat

Ellsworth was wearing when he was shot on the stairs at Marshall House is currently on display at the New York State Military Museum in Saratoga Springs to mark the Sesquicentennial of the Civil War. A star taken from the flag Ellsworth was carrying also is part of the exhibit. A lock of Ellsworth’s hair and his uniform cap are on display at the museum at Fort Ward in Alexandria, the only surviving fort that made up the Civil War Defenses of Washington.

**End Notes**

1. Alexandrians voted 958-106 in favor of Virginia leaving the Union.
8. In its coverage of the “advance of Federal troops” into Virginia, May 25, 1861.
9. McGuire, p. 169
11. Julia Taft Bayner and Mary A. Decredicao, *Tad Lincoln’s Father*

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The Civil War Comes to Duke Street

By Ted Pulliam

At the very beginning of the Civil War in Virginia 150 years ago, the Union army invaded Alexandria. As we have just seen, on May 24, 1861, Colonel Elmer Ellsworth led the 11th New York Volunteer Infantry Regiment, known as the Fire Zouaves, across the Potomac River and into Alexandria. A short time after they landed, Ellsworth was shot and killed after lowering the Confederate flag from the top of the Marshall House Hotel, and then his killer, Confederate sympathizer James Jackson, was himself shot and killed by one of Ellsworth’s men.

Although it is not as well known, another significant event happened that day in Alexandria besides the confrontation between Ellsworth and Jackson. It involved a confrontation on Duke Street between some of the Confederate forces stationed in Alexandria and two separate Union forces seeking to gain control of the city: the first, a primarily Michigan contingent that arrived in Alexandria by land, having crossed into Virginia via the Long Bridge; and the second, one company of Ellsworth’s New York Fire Zouaves, who arrived in Alexandria by water with the rest of the Zouaves, but then separated from them and followed the tracks of the Orange and Alexandria railroad from the waterfront west, toward the important Orange and Alexandria depot on Duke Street. Then, unexpectedly, another player, the commander of the U.S.S. Pawnee, became an actor in the ensuing drama. Acting independently, each played a significant role in the confrontation out west on Duke Street.

The Invasion Begins

Shortly before 2:00 a.m. on the morning of the 24th, Union soldiers began to march from the District of Columbia into Virginia across three bridges: the Long (a wooden bridge located generally where the 14th Street Bridge is now), the Aqueduct (located close to where Key Bridge is now), and the Chain. (See the map on page 6.) Soldiers, cavalry horses, and horses pulling artillery stepped out across the bridges on a night and early morning reported to be "particularly clear, and the moon . . . full and lustrous." Once across, they fanned out under orders to take control of Alexandria, Arlington Heights, and other parts of rebellious Northern Virginia. One of the units ordered to march into Virginia over the Long Bridge early that morning was the 1st Michigan Volunteer Infantry led by Colonel Orlando B. Wilcox. Colonel Willcox was a 38-year-old West-Point-trained officer who had served in both the Seminole War and the Mexican War. As a young officer he had chased buffalo and Indians across the Great Plains. The force he led was composed not only of the 1st Michigan Volunteer Infantry Regiment but also a cavalry troop and a section of artillery consisting of two horse-drawn cannons for a total of over a thousand men. Their mission was to take control of Alexandria.

A number of other Union army units crossed the Long Bridge before it was the turn of Wilcox and his soldiers. Once over the bridge into Virginia, they turned left toward Alexandria. At a time when Union soldiers wore a great variety of uniforms, the Michigan 1st already wore the dark blue uniform with blue forage cap that later would become familiar as the official uniform of the Union army.

Marching to Alexandria: Colonel Orlando B. Wilcox led the 1st Michigan Volunteer Infantry Regiment, plus a cavalry troop and an artillery section for a total of more than 1,000 men. (National Archives)

Marching cautiously they approached Four Mile Run shortly after 4:00 a.m. As they approached, they saw on a hill across the creek several Confederate sentries mounted on horseback. The Confederates quickly rode off in the direction of Alexandria.
Colonel Ellsworth began his journey at (Geesboro) Giesboro Point on the Anacostia River. Colonel Willcox and Colonel Ellsworth were to communicate by signals at Four Mile Run in order to coordinate their entry into Alexandria.

The U.S.S. Pawnee was moored in Alexandria's harbor. Colonel George H. Terrett commanded the Confederate forces in Alexandria.
When Willcox and his men reached the creek, Willcox ordered a halt. He and Colonel Ellsworth had been instructed to contact each other there, and by exchanging signals, coordinate their entry into Alexandria so that they arrived at the same time.

Meanwhile, as Union soldiers began marching into Virginia, three steamboats and a variety of smaller boats chartered to the United States Navy arrived at Giesboro Point in the District of Columbia near the mouth of the Anacostia River. There, under Colonel Elmer Ellsworth’s directions, the 11th New York Volunteer Infantry Regiment, better known as the New York Fire Zouaves (pronounced “Zoo-aahvs”), boarded the small boats that would take them out to the steamers for transportation across the Potomac to Alexandria.

One of the Zouaves boarding was Private Harrison Comings. In his mid 20s, he was a four-year veteran of the New York Fire Department and a member of Company E, a unit of the Fire Zouaves that would play a distinctive role in the coming invasion of Alexandria. He also was an enthusiastic patriot. In fact, young Comings had his hair cut short and in such a way that it outlined an eagle on top of his head.

The small boats spent nearly two hours ferrying the approximately 1,000 men from the shore to the steamers where they crowded on board finding space as best they could. Around 4:00 a.m., the huge paddlewheels of the steamers began to revolve, and the four and a half mile trip down the Potomac River to Alexandria began.

The overloaded boats moved slowly down river. Before long, they reached Four Mile Run, but Colonel Willcox, sitting stationary on his horse, watched from the shore as the steamboats passed by without a signal. Apparently, Ellsworth, in his eagerness to get to Alexandria, forgot, or simply ignored, his orders to coordinate with Willcox. After the boats had passed, Willcox simply ordered his men on to Alexandria. They would meet with the Zouaves when and where they could.

Confederates React

The Confederates stationed in Alexandria, however, were not surprised by the Union soldiers. Shortly after Union forces first began to cross over into Virginia, a mounted sentry who had been stationed near the Chain Bridge reported to Captain Mottrom Dulany Ball of the Confederate cavalry in Alexandria that Union cavalry units were advancing across the bridge. Captain Ball immediately informed Colonel George H. Terrett, a 54-year-old former brevet major in the United States Marine Corps from Fairfax County, who commanded the Confederate forces in Alexandria. As Terrett later wrote, he ordered his men, who were quartered in several places in the city, to be aroused from their beds and to arm themselves and stand by for further orders.

Terrett’s command consisted of five infantry companies from Alexandria: the Alexandria Riflemen, Mount Vernon Guards, Old Dominion Rifles, Emmett Guards, and O’Connell Guards, and two cavalry troops under Captain Ball and Captain E. B. Powell. He may also have had under him other infantry companies from nearby parts of Virginia. Altogether, they totaled some 500 men, considerably fewer than the Union forces headed their way.

Colonel Terrett himself was a veteran officer with a colorful past. In his younger days he had fought a duel at Harper’s Ferry with a U.S. Treasury Department official and emerged unscathed while his opponent had been shot through both legs. In the Mexican War he had behaved courageously leading a company of Marines in storming the walls of Chapultepec Castle (the renowned "Halls of Montezuma"). He had been in command at Alexandria, however, for only two weeks, since May 10 when he took command after the previous commanding officer was relieved in disgrace.

Just before dawn, Terrett, received further word, apparently this time from the mounted sentries posted near Four Mile Run. They hurriedly reported that Union soldiers (Willcox’s men) were approaching the creek and headed toward Alexandria. Terrett immediately sent word to his units scattered throughout the city for them to assemble at the pre-arranged rendezvous at the intersection of Washington and Prince Streets.

Apparently some units had not received the earlier
order to arm themselves and stand by. When this second word came, as Private John Zimmerman, a 23-year-old former clerk at a dry goods store in Alexandria, later wrote, "we were aroused & ordered to pack up & fall in immediately -- instantly all was commotion in the barracks - officers hurrying the men & men hastily dressing, packing knapsacks & blankets, seizing arms & accouterments, & getting into line - no time was lost and in a few minutes we were moving at quick step to our rendezvous, the Lyceum, SW cor Prince & Washington Sts."2

The U. S. Navy Enters

At this time another, unexpected player assumed a role in the developing Alexandria drama. The *U.S.S. Pawnee*, a gunboat carrying a full broadside of 24-pound guns, had been stationed off the Alexandria docks for over three weeks. Shortly after 4:00 a.m. on the morning of the invasion, its commander, 52-year-old Commodore Stephen C. Rowan of the U.S. Navy, another Mexican War veteran, looked up river from the deck of his ship and saw Ellsworth's steamboats approaching him on their way to Alexandria. Concerned for the safety of Alexandria's women and children, Commodore Rowan dispatched Lieutenant R. B. Lowry ashore to find the Confederate commander in Alexandria and demand that he surrender the city. In doing so, however, Commodore Rowan acted without orders and completely on his own. His act was not part of the Union's invasion plan.

Lieutenant Lowry, as he later reported, found Colonel Terrett "in the open street, surrounded by excited soldiers."3 He informed Terrett that, in Terrett's words, "an overwhelming force was about entering the city of Alexandria, and it would be madness to resist."4 There is some discrepancy between what Terrett and what Lowry later reported concerning their conversation, but it appears as though Lowry gave Terrett several hours, until 8:00 or 9:00 a.m., to surrender, evacuate, or face hostilities. Certainly that is what Terrett wrote he understood. Then Lowry returned to the Alexandria dock and the *Pawnee* just as light began spreading across the sky.

Back at the intersection of Washington and Prince Streets, the veteran Terrett took stock of his situation as his troops continued to assemble. He had the offer from Lieutenant Lowry, and he knew the *Pawnee* had its guns trained on the city. He also had just learned from sentries who had been stationed at the dock and now had reported to him that Ellsworth's forces were approaching. Then he looked north out Washington Street and saw additional Union troops (Willcox's skirmishers) approaching the city. An additional factor in his consideration was that ten days earlier, he had received a letter from General Robert E. Lee, commander of all Virginia forces, indicating that Lee did not believe it possible that Terrett "would be able to resist successfully an attempt to occupy Alexandria."5

Terrett decided he could not wait until the time indicated by the *Pawnee* naval officer. Now was the time to evacuate. Once out of Alexandria, he hoped to find railroad cars waiting on the Orange and Alexandria line for him and his men to take them on to Manassas Junction.

Even though all of his men had not reached the assem-
bly point, Terrett quickly gave the commands "Right face - quick right - forward march" and those soldiers who had assembled marched over to Duke Street and out Duke Street toward the edge of town. As they marched out Duke, Private John Zimmerman, the former dry goods store clerk, passed his house and saw "my mother & Bro & Sisters at the door and waving us on."7

One company almost did not make it out of town with the rest of the Confederate soldiers. The quarters of the Old Dominion Rifles were out Cameron Street across from today's Jefferson-Houston School, and through a misunderstanding, they did not get the order to assemble when the other companies did. When they did learn of the order, they hastily formed up and began marching down King Street to the assembly point. On their way, as Private Edgar Warfield, a member of the company, later remembered, two small boys excitedly told them that the other companies already had marched out Duke Street. The Rifles hurriedly changed direction and managed to catch up with the rest of the Alexandria Confederates but not until some distance from the city. There the Confederates found trains that each night had been sent away from Alexandria to prevent their capture. Promptly the excited but weary soldiers climbed on board the train's cars and were taken to Manassas to fight another day.

As Terrett led his Confederate soldiers out Duke Street on horseback, Captain Dulaney Ball rode with him. Terrett had ordered Ball's and Powell's cavalry units to bring up the rear of the march and keep him informed of the enemy's progress.

On their way out Duke Street, Terrett and Ball passed the Orange and Alexandria Railway depot at Duke and Henry Streets. Soon afterward they reached the quarters of Ball's cavalry troop in the 1300 block of Duke near the Price, Birch & Company slave pen and the corner of Duke and Payne Streets. Here Captain Ball left the rest of the Confederates and rode over to his unit's barracks. Ball was a 26-year-old graduate of William and Mary who had been until recently "a talented and witty school-master" in Fairfax County. Slowly he began to assemble his troops, some 40 officers and men - too slowly as it turned out.

### The Zouaves Arrive

As the Confederates were leaving town, the lead steamboat carrying Ellsworth and his regiment of Fire Zouaves docked at the pier at the foot of Cameron Street and began disembarking the Zouaves. Each Zouave wore a bright red fireman's shirt tucked into baggy gray pants and partially covered by a short gray jacket lined with red. On each head was a red forage cap.

First to disembark from the boats was Company E. It consisted of about 100 riflemen including Private Harrison Comings with the eagle on his head. Ellsworth immediately ordered the company to proceed at the double quick march to the Orange and Alexandria Railroad depot to secure the railroad, tear up track, and seize what rolling stock it could find. Shortly after giving the order, Ellsworth led a small party of men into Alexandria and to his death at the Marshall House Hotel.

Meanwhile, Company E proceeded on its mission. Following the Orange and Alexandria train tracks along Union Street, Private Comings and his fellow Zouaves proceeded cautiously through, or perhaps around, the Wilkes Street tunnel and on west along the tracks on Wilkes Street. With no guide, they were proceeding into the unknown.

Before long, the tracks led them to the extensive Orange & Alexandria rail yard beginning at Wolfe and Henry Streets. Private Comings later wrote that when the Zouaves came in sight of the yard, their captain quickly ordered them to positions surrounding it. As some of the soldiers still were moving off to their stations, one of the first to leave returned quickly to report that rebel cavalry were forming one street over. (This was Ball's troop on Duke Street.)

The captain ordered E company to fall in. Once formed, he ordered them to double quick march north on Henry Street toward Duke. As they turned the corner onto Duke, Private Comings looked west and saw Ball's
cavalry in front of their quarters. Then hearing a loud rumbling noise, he glanced to the east, down Duke, and saw, to his surprise, a cannon pointed straight at his company "evidently with the intention of sending us to Kingdom Come without any warning," Comings later wrote. "Our captain made the remark to us that we had better make our peace with God, as our time had come."9

Enter Willcox and Michigan

Several minutes earlier, Colonel Willcox and his soldiers had entered Alexandria from the north by Washington Street "in the midst of a glorious sunrise."10 Unlike the Zouaves, Willcox was not going completely into the unknown -- he actually was somewhat familiar with Alexandria. Nine years earlier he had been stationed at Fort Washington across the river in Maryland and had visited the city from time to time. Also, he had with him a guide, a Captain Owen from the District of Columbia cavalry. Willcox sent Owen on ahead to find out what was happening further into town. Soon Owen returned to report that a troop of rebel cavalry was forming up on Duke Street.

Willcox was unaware that the naval commander of the Pawnee had led the Confederates to believe they could leave unmolested if they left before sometime later on in the morning. He was then at the intersection of King and Washington Streets, two blocks north of Duke Street. Sitting straight on his horse, he called up his two cannons.

Each two-wheeled cannon was attached to a two-wheeled cart called a "limber," resulting in a four wheel cart with the cannon facing to the rear. This combined cart was pulled by four or six horses hitched to the front of it in twos. Willcox's cannons were manned, not by volunteers serving for a limited time, but by regular army soldiers. A cannoneer rode on each of the left-side horses and other cannoneers usually rode seated on an ammunition box on the limber.

Willcox rode with his cannons up King Street, led them onto a cross street, and continued the two blocks south to Duke. As they came to Duke Street, Wilcox directed one of the horse-drawn cannons out onto the dirt of Duke, where the horses quickly wheeled it around to point the cannon up the street toward the rebel cavalry. At almost the same moment the cannoneers completed unhooking the limber and horses from their cannon and prepared to fire, Private Comings and Company E of the Zouaves marched onto Duke Street between Wilcox and the Confederate cavalry, saw the cavalry in one direction and an unfamiliar cannon aiming at them in the other, and thought their time was up.

Before anyone could open fire, Colonel Willcox rode up to the Zouaves and told them to stand by. He then rode on toward the startled Captain Ball, whose men, Willcox later wrote "seemed paralyzed; most of them were in the saddle while others stood stock still with one foot in the stirrup."11 Willcox yelled, "Surrender or I'll blow you to Hell!"12 Captain Ball promptly handed over his sword. Willcox quickly ordered the Zouaves to surround the cavalry, disarm them, take them to the nearby slave pen, and keep them there.

As Willcox and the Zouaves secured the captured Confederate cavalrymen, they received what Willcox later described as "the shocking news"13 that Ellsworth had been shot and was dead.

Willcox left the Zouaves to guard the Confederates and proceeded to secure the railway depot with his Michigan men. He then went to the telegraph office. There he met the new commander of the Zouaves, who told him that he had telegraphed Washington of Ellsworth's death. He
also informed Willcox that the rest of the city was secure, and Willcox proudly telegraphed his superiors in Washington: "Alexandria is ours."\(^{14}\)

**Postscript**

After the Zouaves placed the surrendered Confederate cavalrymen in the wall-enclosed yard of the slave pen, Private Comings and a few others went into one of the buildings also enclosed in the yard.

Here they found a black man chained to a ring on the floor in one of the building's rooms. He said he was a runaway and asked them who they were. When they answered that they were Yankees and they were going to release him, he was elated.

Somewhat later, when soldiers of the 1st Michigan replaced the Fire Zouaves as guards at the slave jail, Colonel Willcox visited there. He found the auctioneer's account book with descriptions of slaves, their owners' names, and the prices at which they were bought and sold. Some of the Michigan soldiers reported to him that they had found three slaves imprisoned there: a man, a girl, and a boy. As they were freeing them, Willcox later wrote, "a well-dressed gentleman came to 'claim his property,' the negro man, whom he grabbed by the collar and attempted to take with him." Instead, "the master was hustled off alone amid the jeers of the Michigan men," and the former slave "took free service" and became a cook in one of the Michigan companies. After the war he traveled to Michigan with a captain of the 1st Michigan, in whose home he later died.\(^{15}\)

What the Zouaves and the Michigan men did in freeing these slaves was actually then against the law. The Fugitive Slave Act enacted in 1850 punished anyone who harbored a fugitive slave and thus deprived the slave's owner of what at that time was considered the slave owner's property. Union General Butler had not yet announced his "contraband" doctrine, which considered Confederate slaves as "contraband of war" to be legitimately kept from helping their rebellious masters. That doctrine was not approved by the Lincoln administration until later in 1861. The New York and Michigan soldiers acted spontaneously based on their own basic sense of what was right and what was wrong.

**Conclusion**

The events on May 24, 1861, over 150 years ago, were more complex than perhaps many of us in Alexandria have realized. Instead of one invading unit arriving in Alexandria by water with a resulting tragedy, there was another invader arriving by land. In addition, there was the complicating factor of the surrender offer from the commander of the Pawnee, the difficult decision made by the commander of the Confederate forces leading to their retreating to fight another day, the slow assembly and ignominious capture of Ball's Confederate cavalry, and one of the earliest freeing of Confederate slaves.

Everyone involved in the invasion that day certainly learned that events in war do not always go according to plan.
Epilogue

Zouaves: After May 24, most of the Fire Zouaves were stationed on Shuter's Hill. Here they were put to work building the first Union fort to protect Alexandria, Fort Ellsworth. While others in the regiment worked on the fort, Private Comings and Company E were ordered into Alexandria to work with the Quartermaster Department guarding the Quartermaster's stores.

Two months after the invasion of Alexandria, the Zouave regiment fought in the First Battle of Manassas. At that battle, Private Comings was knocked unconscious by a member of Jeb Stuart's Confederate cavalry and thought dead. Two days after the battle, however, after a long walk from the battlefield, he rejoined the Zouaves in Alexandria.

The Fire Zouaves were disbanded in the summer of 1862. Comings transferred to a Connecticut unit, and he was severely wounded at the Battle of Fredericksburg. After the war he became a police officer and later Chief of Police of Malden, Massachusetts, where he died in 1893.

Captain of the U.S.S. Pawnee: Commodore Stephen Clegg Rowan, captain of the Pawnee, received a written reprimand from Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles for his unauthorized "interference" in the secret movement on Alexandria. "In demanding the surrender of the town when the expedition from Washington was secretly approaching it, you committed, to say the least, a grave error."16

However, Commodore Rowan's career survived the reprimand, and in fact, it prospered. He participated in General Burnside's invasion of eastern North Carolina in 1862, when he led 13 steamers in an attack on a fleet of Confederate ships in the Pasquotank River in which the whole Confederate fleet was captured or destroyed. He also participated in the siege of Charleston. He obtained the rank of Vice Admiral and died in 1890 at the age of 81.

Alexandria Confederates: While camped in the area of Manassas and Bull Run, the Alexandria Confederate infantry units were combined with infantry units from other parts of Northern Virginia into the 17th Virginia Infantry Regiment. This unit fought in numerous Civil War battles from the First Battle of Manassas to Appomattox.

Privates Zimmerman and Warfield fought in many of those battles and survived the war. After the war John Zimmerman became a wholesale coal merchant in Alexandria and died in 1926 at the age of 87. Edgar Warfield became a druggist in Alexandria and died in 1934 at the age of 92, the last survivor of those who marched out of Alexandria on May 24, 1961.

Colonel George H. Terrett was initially elevated to the command of a brigade at Manassas, but before the battle took place, he yielded his command to General James Longstreet, who outranked him, when Longstreet arrived in Manassas. Terrett was then placed in charge of the heavy artillery that defended the rear position of the Confederate army. He later returned to the marines, this time the Confederate States Marine Corps, and later commanded the fortifications at Drewery's Bluff. Four days before Lee surrendered, Terrett was captured leading a unit toward Appomattox. He was released on July 25, 1865, and died ten years later in Fairfax County at the age of 68.

Captain Mottrom Dulany Ball and his cavalry unit were released in June only after they pledged in writing not again to take up arms against the United States. His signing this pledge and his apparent negligence in being captured in Alexandria were very controversial in the South. In September, 1862, however, he was formally exchanged in a general prisoner exchange (even though he was not then a prisoner), which permitted him to fight again for the South. He then served in the Confederate army with distinction, commanding the 11th Virginia Cavalry Regiment and rising to the rank of lieutenant colonel. He was wounded twice, at Brandy Station and Toms Creek. After the war he practiced law in Fairfax County for several years. In 1878 he was appointed Collector of Customs for the Territory of Alaska and moved to Sitka, Alaska. At that time, the holder of that office was the chief representative of the U.S. Government in Alaska. He also served as Alaska's first unofficial delegate to Congress. He died in 1887 at the age of 54 on board ship heading back to Virginia.
Colonel Orlando B. Willcox and the 1st Michigan Volunteers: In the reorganization of the Union army before the First Battle of Manassas, Colonel Willcox was given expanded responsibilities as the commander of the Second Brigade of the Third Division. His brigade consisted of four regiments, including his old regiment, the 1st Michigan Volunteers, and the 11th New York Volunteers (the Fire Zouaves). Colonel Willcox's Brigade fought in the crucial part of the Manassas battle. Willcox himself behaved bravely, was wounded, and was captured. On August 16, 1862, he was exchanged and immediately promoted to brigadier general. He later led units in several important battles, including Antietam, Fredericksburg, the Wilderness, and the Crater.

After the war Willcox remained in the army and served in several posts, including a posting to Whipple Barracks in Prescott, Arizona in 1878, which resulted in his leading units in fights with the Chiricahua Apaches. He died in 1907 at the age of 84. In 1895, he had received the Congressional Medal of Honor for his actions at the First Battle of Manassas.

Ted Pulliam is the author of the recently published book *Historic Alexandria*, which tells the Alexandria story from the days of the early Indians through 2010. His articles, primarily on historical subjects, have appeared in the *Washington Post*, national magazines *American History* and *WWII History*, the *Alexandria Gazette*, and other publications. He is a member of the Alexandria Archaeology Commission and the Board of Directors of the Alexandria Historical Society. He will be relating stories of people and events from his new book *Historic Alexandria* at the Lyceum, 201 South Washington Street, at 7:30 p.m. on Wednesday, October 26, 2011.
End Notes


2John R. Zimmerman, Diary of John R. Zimmerman, unpublished, Box 113, Manuscripts Section, Local History/Special Collections Branch, Alexandria Public Library, 1.


6Zimmerman, Diary of John R. Zimmerman, 2.

7 Ibid.


11 Ibid.

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14Official Army Records, I:2, 41.

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The principal sources of this article are:


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Commemorative envelope eulogizing Colonel Ellsworth. The caption reads:
(Bruce Greenberg Collection)

O’er Sumter’s walls our flag again shall wave
And traitors’ doom shall be a bloody grave;
Our Union and OUR LAWS we must maintain,
And drive foul treason from our land again.
In this issue of the *Alexandria Chronicle* Marc Leepson describes a confrontation at the Marshall House Hotel and the galvanizing effect of Colonel Ellswood’s “maryrdom.” And, Ted Pulliam describes the other exciting but less known confrontation that day between arriving Union troops and departing Confederate infantry out west on Duke Street.

The dramatic confrontation on May 24, 1861, in Alexandria, at the Marshall House Hotel, resulted in the death of Union Colonel Elmer Ellswood.

The less-known confrontation, in Alexandria, on May 24, 1861, occurred west on Duke Street, where Union troops faced cannon at close range.