

ANACOSTIA OR NAVY YARD BRIDGE

Captain Thomas N Conrad in his book, "A Confederate Spy, A Story of the Civil War," published by J S Ogilvie Publishing Co., 57 Rose Street, New York, no date, tells of a number of times when he and others passed over the Anacostia or Navy Yard bridge when entering or leaving Washington, D C, during the years 1861 - 1865. In most cases he was not even challenged. It appears that the principal approaches to Washington during the Civil War were guarded by pickets, but one who knew the ground was able to avoid these and enter Washington over back roads without being seen by a picket.

Conrad says (on page 5), "A college mate, who now sleeps beneath the sod of the Mississippi Valley, and myself, were among the few perhaps, who not only scouted within our lines, but were frequently sent by President Davis and our general officers within the limits of the Union capital and once into Canada."

Conrad, who was teaching school in 1861 in Georgetown, adjoining Washington, said (page 6), "Few towns of its size, South of Mason's and Dixon's line, contained as many sympathizers with the Confederate cause as did Georgetown." During that year he was arrested for his Southern sympathies and cast into old Capitol Prison. He states, (page 7), "My prison life was comparatively short, but eventful enough. In a few days I was paroled under a promise not to leave the capital until regularly exchanged and for six weeks, pending the trade of prisoners, the freedom of the city was mine, although the first bloody encounter at Bull Run had then taken place." After being exchanged, he joined the secessionist army. He became a Confederate spy and made many trips to Washington to gather information. On the first trip and on others thereafter he made the Surratt Tavern, south of Washington, his regular stopping place (page 17). He says of this first trip, From him (Surratt, the husband of Mrs Surratt and father of John Surratt) "I hired a horse and rode boldly over the Navy Yard bridge from the Anacostia hills into Washington, my having the appearance of an ordinary Maryland farmer causing the guard to advance me unchallenged. On my arrival I put up at a lower Pennsylvania Avenue hotel, usually frequented by country people and hucksters.

I passed as one of them, of course, and nobody had the slightest idea of my identity. I walked around boldly as if I hadn't a care in life and during those troublous times was the most loyal of the loyal. After nightfall I called upon friends, whom I knew to be, at heart at least, if not openly, in sympathy with the Confederacy and unfolded to them the object of my visit to the city in disguise."

The following is quoted from pages 20 and 21:

"As I again crossed the river to the Maryland side, relieved immeasurably at having been able to take the commissioners to the "Sacred soil of Virginia" in safety, I found time to indulge in a hearty laugh over an incident of the previous night. It could scarcely have been more ludicrous and not until all danger was passed did the comical side of the situation burst upon me. With all bridges guarded and the old Chesapeake and Ohio Canal paralleling the river for miles on the Maryland side, we had been at wit's end to discover a means of reaching the ford, with our team, from the main-road, without being ourselves discovered. Fortunately there was a culvert running underneath the canal as an outlet for a fair-sized, hill-side stream, and this was wide enough to admit of the passage. But we had forgotten the carriage top. It must be removed. Never for a moment did it occur to us to remove the wheels, carry the wagon through and then refit the expedition. We must needs take the longest plan. The slave, to whom I have referred, was sent ^{back} to the house of a Confederate sympathizer, named Butler, and instructed to request the loan of a hand-saw, which was secured. Then ensued what I think was the hardest job I ever had. The top-frame of that old carryall was as tough as iron and I sawed at the supports until every muscle ached. But the last one was finally cut and with a diminutive canopy we resumed the journey, which an hour later had resulted finely. Anyway the loan of a three million dollars was made during the next few weeks and the sinews of war thus supplied aided to prolong the struggle for more than three years from that day. Yet those few weeks which immediately preceded the final closing of the loan were fraught with weightiest of schemes and made unwritten history to fill volumes."

Conrad claims (page 26) that in order to get information about the number of troops in the Union armies or orders given to Union generals by the Federal War Department for advances on Confederate forces it was not necessary to intercept Federal dispatches "for trusted Southern sympathizers were employed in the War Department under Secretary Stanton's very nose."

He was sent to Washington in the Spring of 1862 to contact these individuals. He states (page 27) "Again it was easy enough to get into Washington or at least it proved so after the use of a little trickery. After my usual fashion I was approaching on horseback the Navy Yard bridge, which is the great entrance to the city from Southern Maryland. The structure was always well picketed by Union soldiers and I noticed that the guard was scanning me very critically. I knew arrest would be fatal and unless he could be at once disarmed of all suspicion the Southern spy was in danger of being taken into custody on the spot. My horse became frightened at the noise and commotion usually around the Navy Yard and began to snort and jump. I helped him along in his fright by several vigorous kicks in the side - spurs might have betrayed me - for I instantly foresaw how I should endeavor to meet the emergency and siezed upon the horse's antics as a pretext. Calling to the cavalryman, I said: 'Please to strike my horse with your sabre and drive him on the bridge for me.' The cavalryman, nothing loth, laughed and fell into the trick. He shouted to his comrades to assist and thinking it great sport, they attacked the refractory beast with a great deal of zest. The next moment a 'rebel spy' had been driven into Washington by the sabres of loyal cavalrymen.

"These rather frequent and successful secret expeditions to the seat of the Yankee government had so emboldened me that I was ready for anything. My nerves had become so trained by frequent contact with Federal officers and soldiers; my manner was made so imperturbable by sudden shocks and unexpected surprises; my soldier life was so habituated to this environment, that I had well nigh concluded I was not born to be hanged or shot, and was ready to shake hands with Stanton himself or dine in the most placid way imaginable with a whole table of the biggest generals in the Union

service. Passing back and forth continually from Washington to the Confederate lines, I generally made a stopping place on the road at the old Surratt hostelry in Maryland, but necessity demanded I should have headquarters in the city proper and these I found."

Conrad says (page 38), "Finding that now I should be compelled to go into Washington more frequently than ever, I called upon the Secretary of War and advised establishing a reliable line of communication between Richmond and the headquarters of the Yankee government. Mr Sedden at once indorsed the proposition and requested me to establish it without delay. A signal station under the charge of a Lieutenant Charles Cawood had been in successful operation along the lower Potomac for some time, and proved very useful, but the War Department needed a direct line of its own, subject to its order and reliable at all times. To establish this I rode from the front door of the War Department of Richmond to the Potomac river; crossed the stream and rode to the front door of the War Department of Washington, making the line complete throughout."

He selected a high cliff near Boyd's Hole on the Potomac as a site for a signal station, manned it with two expert oarsmen, a courier and a negro servant. He states (pages 39-40), "So with four men, three horses, a good boat, a fine field-glass, a pocket compass and 'quarters' upon a high cliff of the Potomac, I was ready for operations. I crossed the river and selected three practicing physicians who could ride at any hour of the night, without being suspected by Federal troops. They were known as neighborhood doctors and were heart and soul in sympathy with us. As my former facial disguise had become rather palpably evident to the detectives around Washington, I allowed a heavy mustache grow (sic) and with a long imperial as the remainder of my hirsute appendages, concluded I could pass once more as an entirely different person. Whenever thereafter I was in Washington and wished to send a dispatch to Richmond, I had only to call upon Dr. Wyvill, the physician living near the navy Yard, and give the secret missive to him. He would ride over the Navy Yard bridge, whitch (sic) was always under guard, unchallenged because of his doctor's buggy, and give the dispatch to physicen Number 2, Dr. Kent, living well down the Maryland shore.