



BLUE AND GRAY DISPATCH

A Historical Account of the Battle of South Anna Bridge

Soldier Alexander Pierce, February 22, 2021

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Alexander Smith Peace

In 1894, the Richmond Times-Dispatch asked Alexander Peace to write an account of the Battle of South Anna Bridge. His account, which follows, was never published in that paper but did appear in the Henderson Daily Dispatch in 1926.

The battle of South Anna Bridge was fought on the 26th of June, 1863. On the Confederate side was Company A, 44th Regiment, North Carolina troops, consisting of 64 men, including Lieutenant-Colonel T. L. Hargrove and Captain R. L. Rice, all born and raised in Granville County, North Carolina. The Federal troops consisted of 1,500 mounted men, with two field pieces, and were commanded by Colonel Spears.

There were two railroads running out from Richmond, which came together at Hanover Junction, a few miles north of us. At this point a large amount of army supplies, including thirty thousand stands of arms, with ammunition, were stored as a reserve supply for General Lee's Army, then on its way to Gettysburg. This was the objective point of the enemy. The plan of Colonel Spears was to land at the White House (reference is not to the executive mansion in Washington, but to a building in the vicinity of the battle), and by a rapid movement burn the railroad bridge across South Anna river, destroy Lee's supplies at Hanover Junction, and burn North Anna railroad bridge on his return.

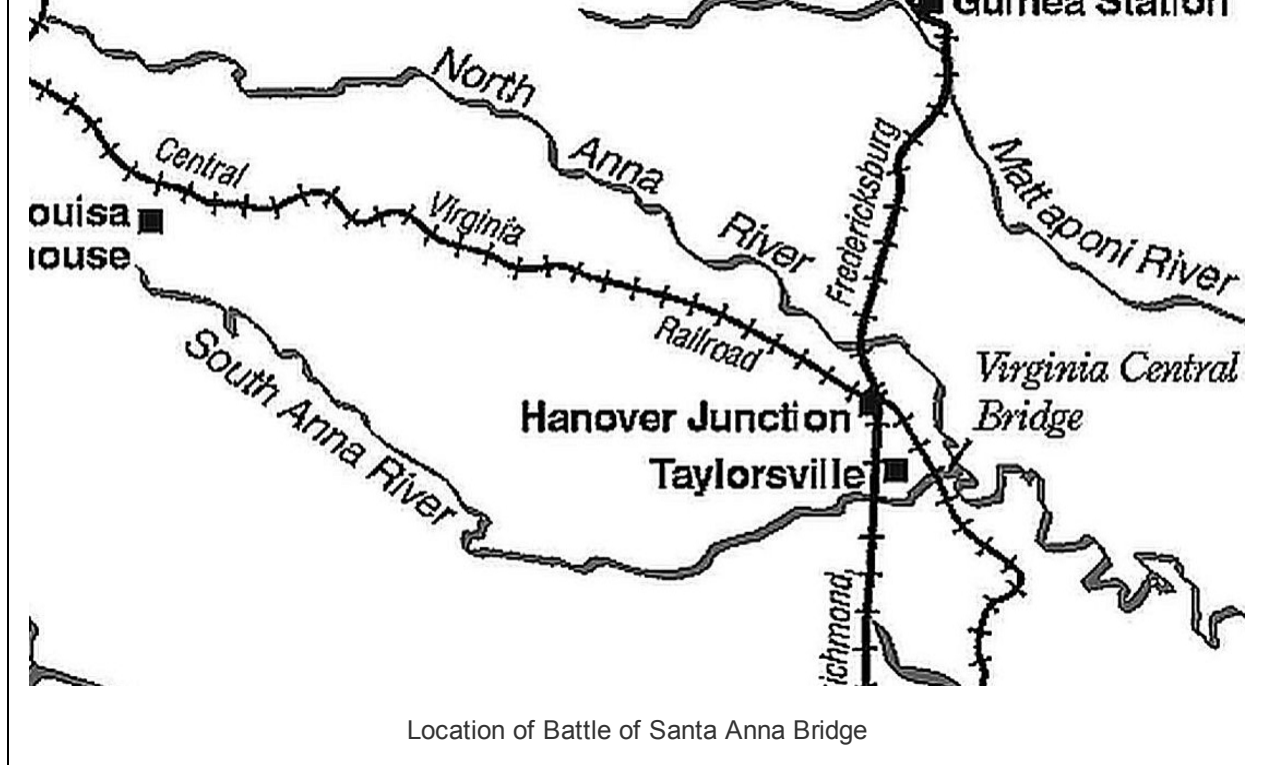
If this plan had succeeded, Lee's army would have been crippled for the want of supplies and direct communication with the Confederate Capital. Colonel Hargrove knew we held the key to the situation, and, therefore, issued the order to Company A to hold the bridge at all hazards. Seven of our men were killed and all the rest were wounded and were captured, except myself, who, being severely wounded, was left on the field for dead. Many died afterwards from their wounds. I saw as many as eleven wounds on one man, and from three to five were common.

Federals Fought Desperately

The Federals fought with carbines and artillery at a distance, and with pistols and sabers at close quarters. Our men were armed with Mississippi rifles, which we used at a distance, and with which we clubbed the enemy in close quarters.

A detachment of fifteen men from Company G, 44th North Carolina, from Orange County, on guard at a ford above the bridge, were with us after the enemy had crossed the river two miles below the bridge. We did not know this bridge, to which a Negro had piloted the enemy.

The fight lasted about four hours, two hours before the enemy crossed to our side and two hours afterwards, including about ten minutes at close quarters. Dirt forts had been constructed on the north side, but these were too far from the bridge for occupation. We had no protection except the railroad ties, with the iron rails on the track in front and the road watchman's house on our right. We first formed on the south side of the river to receive the enemy. A blue streak appeared on the hills to the south of us. A few minutes later and the hill slopes just above us were occupied by the enemy. Seeing that we could not withstand the charge which the enemy was preparing to make, Colonel Hargrove ordered a retreat across the bridge. This was affected under a charge from the enemy, and an artillery fire, disabling eight of our men.



Enemy Charged Three Times

About twelve hundred of the enemy who had crossed the river formed in line of battle just out of range of our guns. The enemy then made three charges on horseback, all of which were repulsed. Meanwhile the fight continued from across the river with carbine and cannon. I had been ordered with seven men to guard the pass under the bridge, about thirty feet long, as well as to prevent the enemy from getting fire to it on the other side, and was lying on the road grade watching the enemy forming for the last charge. About 300 dismounted men were given the start so as to pass under the bridge at the instant of the attack in our front by the main force of the mounted men. They broke into platoons of fourteen men, in close order, as they passed a little mound on the river bank about half way from the main body to the bridge. A shrill "hallow" was given as a signal for the charge. Instantly 300 footmen moved in double quick, and 600 maddened horses, with rowels thrust deep into their sides, groaning with pain and exertion, with thundering hoof and clanking sabers, came down upon us, now about sixty strong.

The detachment of seven fired their well aimed guns in the faces of the 300 passing under the bridge and then attempted to club them. This checked but for a moment the advancing column. Those in front, being pressed forward by those in their rear, gathered our seven men in the human mass. With a right wheel and a double quick up the railroad track, and around the watchman's cabin, and we were all together in one general melee.

Melee of Bloodshed

The enemy had gained our rear; we were completely surrounded, men in ranks and out of ranks, mounted and on foot, armed and disarmed, were on all sides, while horses without riders ran wild in every direction through the fields. We would now have been an easy prey if the enemy had kept in ranks and stood off from us; but being too eager they rushed in upon us about ten to our one, and were too close and crowded to use their sabers to advantage. A pistol shot was more dangerous to them than it was to us. Nor could those Federals who remained in ranks do more than stand on the outside and wait for something to turn up. While on the inside there was bloody work going on.

The Battle at Its Worst

Colonel Hargrove is knocked down with a sabre cut; his assailant is felled across him. Another Federal soldier standing on the railroad track just above him with uplifted sabre, endeavoring to strike his head, is clubbed in the mouth by a Confederate soldier[1], and at the same time is shot through the heart by Sergeant Strum, and falls dead across our colonel. Now a mass of humanity, both the Grey and the Blue, is piled about him, grappling for the lives of each other. Still Colonel Hargrove's voice rings out cheering his comrades to the fray. Private Satterwhite receives a lbow on the back of his head, knocking him to his all fours, his gun flying from his hands. He crawls to where a sabre is lying, seizes it and before he has fully straightened himself up, strikes down the man before him. Corporal Knot capturing two men and taking their arm from them to the rear, where he finds a solid column of Pennsylvanians ready to receive them. Sergeant Hayes, a man of most powerful muscle, runs amuck through the crowd, knocking from one to two men down at a stroke with the butt of his gun, but is felled to the ground by a blow across his nose by a carbine. Sergeant Buchanan, just up the railroad outside the ring, breaking the monotony of a constant fire from his rifle, is shot through the lungs and is captured after a struggle with half a dozen Federals. Another confederate soldier with clothes on fire is furiously attacking, with the butt of his gun, the inner column of the enemy's ranks. Private Cash, not yet seventeen years old, finds himself face to face with Colonel Spears, who orders him to surrender. Cash replies, "Not until my colonel commands me" and, rushing at Colonel Spears, is shot dead by him just as the bayonet was about to pierce the Colonel's body. Colonel Spears, I am told, stood over his body after the fight and said, "Poor boy, I am sorry; but if I had not shot him as soon as I did, he would have killed me."

I have given these few instances out of many that occurred of a like nature, that a better idea may be formed of the character of the fight. At last Colonel Hargrove called out, "I surrender." I stopped fighting and looked toward him, but could not see him for the enemy, nor could I see a single Confederate on his feet. A double column of dismounted men just in their rear.

I now recognized that I was not only severely wounded, but that my clothes were on fire from a pistol shot.[2] The fight continued for a few minutes longer without any perceptible abatement when the Federal who were in the ranks went in and parted the combatants, pushing their comrades back, and placed a guard around our men. And the battle was over.



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