

The Story of the Chinguapin Rangers

Before I begin my presentation today, I want to give credit to John Kincheloe — whose Confederate ancestor was Capt. James C. Kincheloe of the Chinquapin — and Keith Pearson who did most of the research for this subject.

The Chinquapin Rangers was a cavalry company of partisan rangers formed under the Partizan Ranger Act passed by the Confederate Congress on April 21, 1862. The company was formed by Capt. William Gardner Brawner in May 1862 at Buckhall in Prince William County. The Confederate army had recently vacated the area, leaving it undefended, and part of the reason Brawner formed the unit was to fill that void.

The rangers' more formal name was Prince William Partisan Rangers or Prince William Rangers. A total of 131 men were enlisted into the new company, most hailing from the Bull Run-Occquan area of southern Fairfax County and from the north-central and eastern parts of Prince William.

According to a law passed by the Confederate Congress, the men elected their officers by popular vote.

Many local names some of you will recognize were added to the company roster. There were eight men named Davis; seven named Cornwell; five named Kincheloe and five named Mayhugh. There were three men each named Bravner, Carter, Fairfax, Hixson, Lynn, Petit, Reid, Richardson and Tillet. There were two rangers each named Beach, Colbert, Cole, Crouch, King, Lowe, Marshall, Murphy, Payne, Shepherd, Spittle, Stone and Wilt.

The Chinquapin Rangers took their name from the imagination of one of their own members, Pvt. James E. Stone. When asked by a lady the name of his company, Stone – in a spirit of fun – told her that they were Chinquapin Rangers.....the chinquapin being a deciduous, bushy, dwarf chestnut that grows locally and has a small edible nut. The name followed them ever after.

In September 1862, they were formally mustered into Confederate service as Co. H of the 15th Virginia Cavalry, and spent much of their time scouting for Jeb Stuart, raiding behind Union lines and performing spy and reconnaissance missions as an independent company. Confederate cavalymen had to provide their own mounts and weapons; if a soldier had neither he had to liberate one from the Yankees.

One of the first raids the Chinquapins conducted was on the afternoon of October 31, 1862, when they derailed a locomotive and 12 cars down the railroad tracks from Devereux Station – today's Clifton, Va. – near Bull Run Bridge. Although the train slid more than 50 feet down a slope, nobody was hurt, but all of the nearly 100 soldiers and wood-cutters were taken as prisoners.

STARTER

The Chinquapins were at the extreme right of Gen. Lee's lines at the Battle of Fredericksburg in December 1862, there serving with Gen. Rooney Lee's cavalry brigade. To their right was the Rappahannock River, to their rear was Massaponax Creek. Maj. John Pelham's horse artillery fired down on the Union lines nearby. The federal response netted seven Chinquapins, and Pvt. George Wilt was so severely wounded he needed to have his left leg amputated.

It was on this day that Maj. Pelham earned Gen. Lee's sobriquet, "The Gallant Pelham" because he caused such confusion in the Union ranks by continuously firing and moving his artillery from point to point.

The Chingapins participated along with 1,800 other Confederate cavalry in Stuart's Christmas Raid. It was during this raid that Stuart sent his famous telegram from Burke Station to Union Quartermaster General Montgomery Meigs complaining of the poor quality of the mules he had just captured, saying that these mules seriously interfered with the movement of the captured wagons. Following this, they cut the telegraph wires to limit federal communications.

Shortly after this, Stuart detailed John Singleton Mosby to "take nine men" and harass Union lines north of Centreville.

When Mosby formed his first company, E.L. A., on June 10, 1863, the Chingapins were there, and rode with the newly formed 43rd Battalion, Virginia Cavalry on their first official raid. They crossed the Potomac River and engaged the 6th Michigan Cavalry at Seneca Mills, Maryland on June 11. It was there that Capt. Brawner was killed while gallantly leading the charge.

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Their mission was a success, however, as they routed the Yankees and destroyed their camp before they retired back across the Potomac with 17 federal prisoners and 25 horses.

Throughout the rest of 1863 and 1864, the Chingquapin Rangers conducted various raiding operations primarily along the Orange & Alexandria Railroad between Prince William Co. and Accotink in Fairfax County. Raiding in this area pitted them against Curcoran's Irish Legion, which was stationed at Union Mills to guard the Bull Run Bridge and the railroad. Later, the 4th Delaware Infantry was moved there to guard the railroad. The Chingquapins' territory of activity was mostly east and south of Mosby's Confederacy and only partially overlapped it.

The Chinquapin Rangers captured Union Maj. Willard, the fiancé of Confederate spy Antonia Ford while they were traveling from Fairfax to Washington. Given the choice of letting the couple go or sending Maj. Willard off to a POW camp, their guard, Corp. Lewis Woodyard, chose to let them go. Ms. Ford and Willard later married. Years later, their son Joseph Willard, a one-time Lt. Governor of Virginia and an ambassador to Spain, gave Lewis Woodyard a fine gray saddle horse to thank him for his good deed toward his parents and for his compassion.

Once the Chinquapins a mission to personally pick up and deliver a pair of gold spurs sent from Prince George's County, Maryland admirers of Gen. Lee. The gold spurs passed through to Mrs. Elizabeth Frobel, who brought the spurs to the William Reid farm on Franconia Rd. in Fairfax Co. With thousands of Union troops nearby, the gold spurs were transported by the rangers to Gen. Lee, who received them while at a review of his army near Culpeper Court House.

In an attempt to rein in some partisan ranger units for their misdeeds, the Confederate government in 1864 did away with all partisan units except Mosby's and McNeil's. The Chincupin Rangers refused to follow the orders to join the regular cavalry and, on Sept. 6, 1864, they were ordered to report to Gen. Fitzhugh Lee in the Shenandoah Valley. Again, they refused, and the government ordered them disbanded; still, they decided to continue operating as a unit, but locally.

The command decided to disband on December 4, 1864, and an attempt to reorganize the unit was officially denied. Against government policy and general orders to the contrary, and with full notice of the situation, Col. Mosby bent the rules and enrolled a significant number of the Chincupians in to his command as part of Co. H, his eighth and last company, formed on April 5, 1865. Ironically, they once belonged to Co. H of the 15th Virginia Cavalry and now were serving in Co. H of the 43rd. Mosby had experience with the Chincupians, knew they were seasoned, well-armed and equipped who wanted to continue defending their homeland.

Their new company commander was George Baylor, and their first assignment was to destroy the Loudoun Rangers, which they did not far from Hartsown, West Virginia on April 7th. Five or six federals were killed, 45 prisoners were captured, 70 horses were taken as well as a number of arms and a great deal of equipment.

STAPLES

The Chingapin Rangers operated near or with the Confederate spy and underground communications network, including with Confederate spy Frank Stringfellow. Along with Col. Mosby's Co. H, they had contact with demolition expert Sgt. Frank Harney. Company H's mission -- I call it a cover story -- was to go into Fairfax County to blow up bridges and steal mules, actually a diversion so that Harney could be met by Confederate agents and escorted into Washington and, I believe, blow up the White House with Lincoln and his cabinet in it. Lincoln was planning to meet with his cabinet in the White House on April 11.

That was not to be, however. Some Rangers were invited to a party at a home in the Burke, Va. area of Fairfax County near Arundel's Tavern -- now known as Brimstone Hill -- (the yard of which served as Capt. Baylor set up his camp. Some of the men attended a party in the neighborhood but, strangely, several of the women were rade to Rangers -- something that never happened. Observing this, Baylor told his men to return to their camp for the

night. The next morning -- April 10 -- as they were leaving for their mission, some 250 Yankees or approximately twice as many troopers as Baylor had, got the jump on the Rangers and decimated the unit. The running fight headed south, and ended at Wolf Run Shoals near the Occoquan River in southern Fairfax.

Frank Harney and his team, meanwhile, headed north and were captured near the Potomac River. Harney had detonators and fuses but no timer for a bomb. The team was sent to the Old Capitol Prison, and Harney's name was entered as "Harvey". Nothing came from his arrest, however, as his story seemed to check out. Harney was soon sent to the federal POW camp in Elmira, NY, but was let go after a few weeks. After he walked out of the gates, Frank Harney disappeared forever -- no real estate records, marriage or death records were ever found.

After the war, more than a few Chinquapin Rangers made positive and valuable contributions to society. Some became judges, sheriffs, politicians and other public servants. A few became ministers and worked for peace and reconciliation. Others returned to their land and settle down to farm or open a small business. Each in his own way did his best to pick up the pieces of his shattered homeland and move forward one day at a time.