

The Eastern Shore of Virginia In the Civil War

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### ABSTRACT

Gen. John Adams Dix, the Union commander of the Department of Maryland, wrote in an 1861 letter to Francis Blair of President Lincoln's administration that "we are in the most danger on the Eastern Shore [of Virginia]." Dix did not exaggerate when he implied that Accomac and Northampton County embodied secessionist sentiment on the Delmarva Peninsula in 1861. Dix knew that the Eastern Shore of Virginia, the most southern region of Delmarva, heavily influenced its neighbors to the north. If it made a strong demonstration in favor of the Confederacy, the Eastern Shore of Maryland might go spiraling toward secession. It could also decrease Union sentiment and progress in lower Delaware. With this in mind, Dix decided to make a preemptive strike on the Eastern Shore of Virginia in late 1861. Although this campaign describes only part of the question that this thesis entails it embodies the overarching importance of what occurred in the area.

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# MAPS

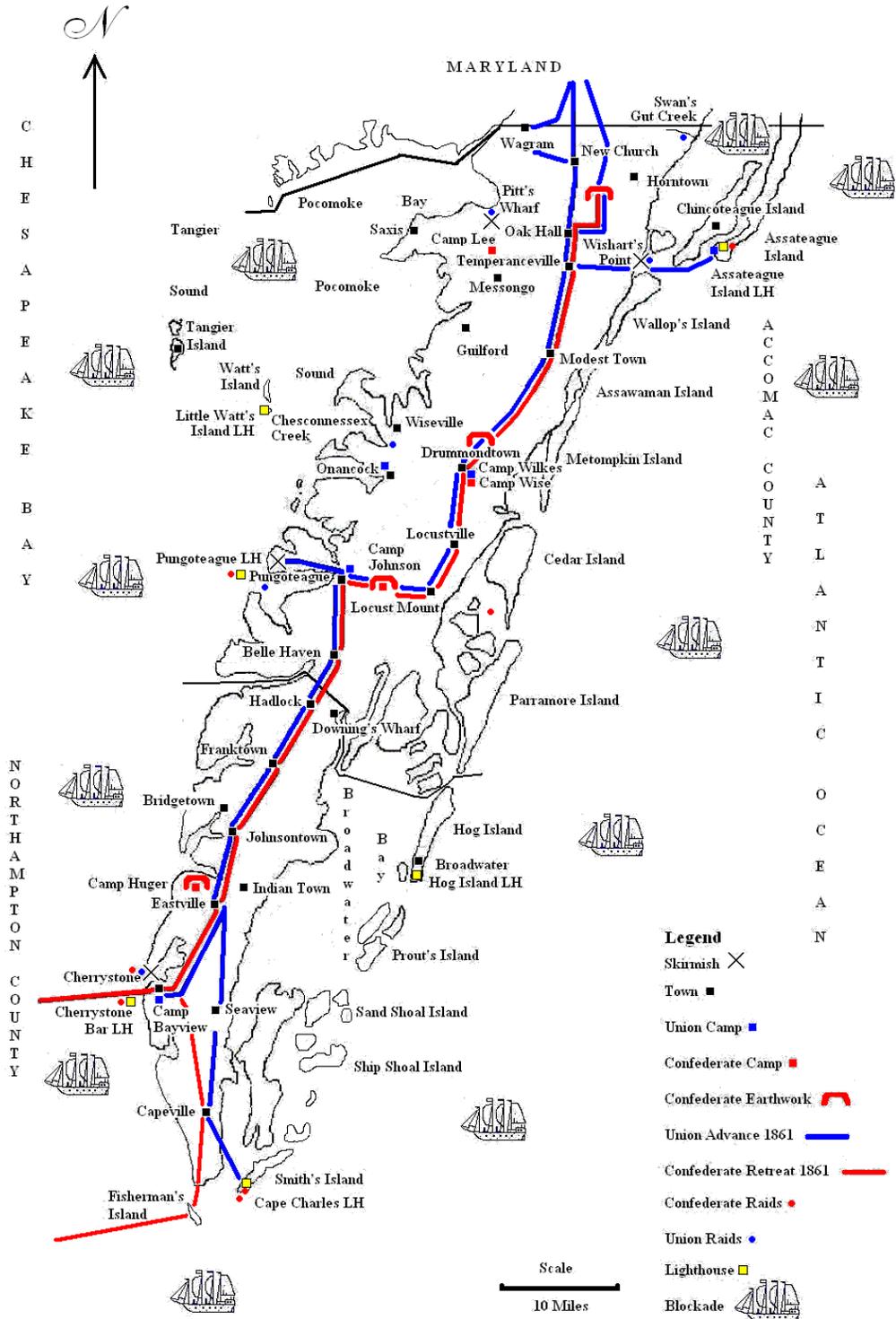


Figure 1. The Eastern Shore Front, 1861-1865.

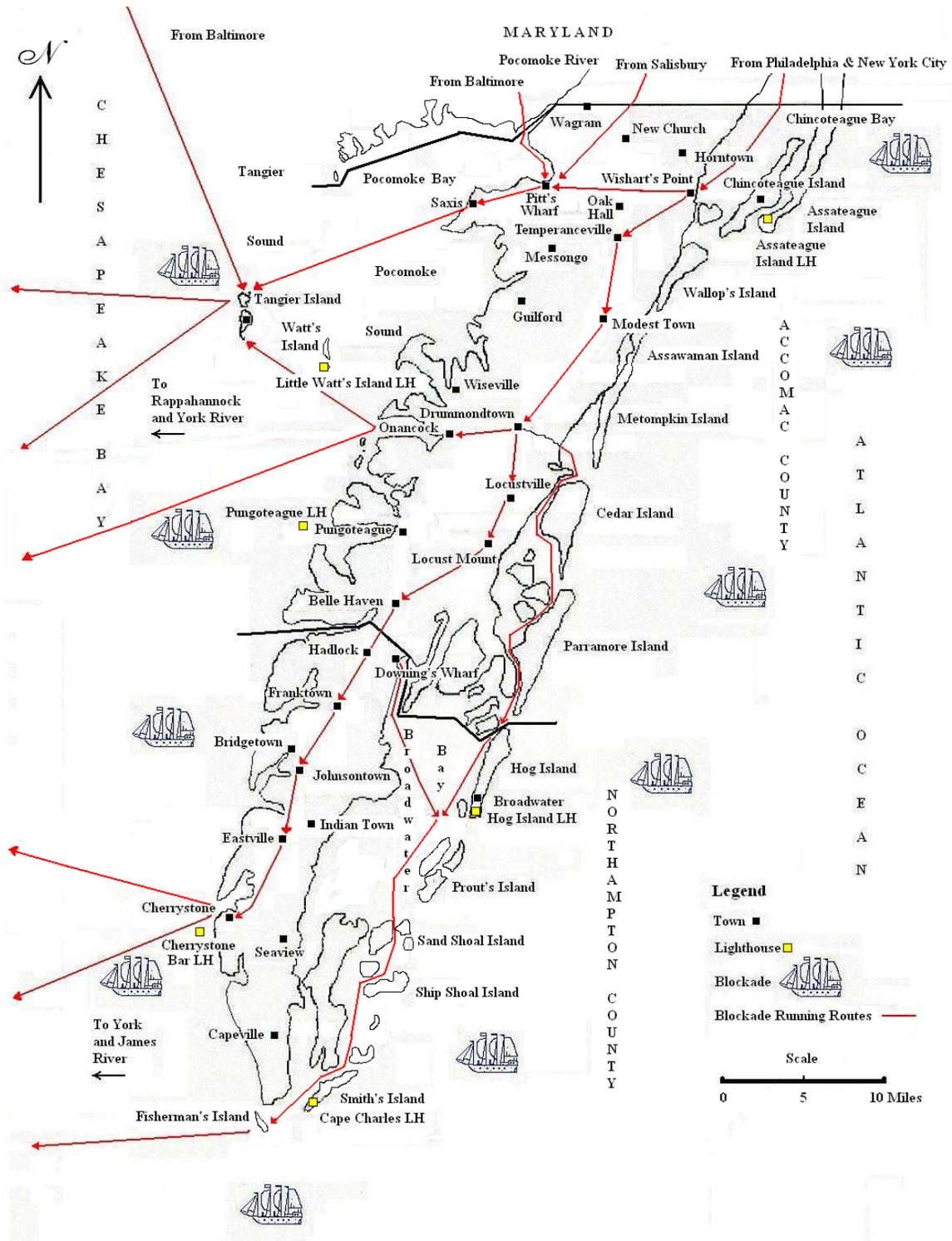


Figure 2. Blockade Running on the Eastern Shore, 1861-1865.

## CHAPTER I - INTRODUCTION

### Goals of the Study

Gen. John Adams Dix, the Union commander of the Department of Maryland, wrote in an 1861 letter to Francis Blair of President Lincoln's administration that "we are in the most danger on the Eastern Shore [of Virginia]." <sup>1</sup> Dix did not exaggerate when he implied that Accomac and Northampton County embodied secessionist sentiment on the Delmarva Peninsula in 1861. Dix knew that the Eastern Shore of Virginia, the most southern region of Delmarva, heavily influenced its neighbors to the north. If it made a strong demonstration in favor of the Confederacy, the Eastern Shore of Maryland might go spiraling toward secession. It could also decrease Union sentiment and progress in lower Delaware. With this in mind, Dix decided to make a preemptive strike on the Eastern Shore of Virginia in late 1861. Although this campaign describes only part of the question that this thesis entails it embodies the overarching importance of what occurred in the area. <sup>2</sup>

The events that transpired have been incorporated in this study of two isolated borderland Confederate communities, Accomac and Northampton County. This is a military, maritime and social history. It is a military history because of the many skirmishes and raids that occurred there. It is a maritime history owing to the ramifications of blockade running on the Atlantic and the Chesapeake during this period. Lastly, it is a social history because of the Union occupation that its civilians had to undergo throughout most of the war. Hopefully, these themes will assure

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<sup>1</sup> Susie M. Ames, "Federal Policy Toward the Eastern Shore of Virginia." *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, 69 (1961) : 432-459.

<sup>2</sup> Delmarva is a modern connotation denoting the peninsula made up by parts of Delaware, Maryland, and Virginia.

a fresh scholastic view of an academically dusty topic in addition to enabling it to glean a sufficient amount of information that ties together the Eastern Shore and the Civil War.

Although this time period and this area have been discussed in various literary works, it has never been argued that this area was significant. That study argues that the Shore underwent important military duress in the form of raids, skirmishes, and tactical maneuvers. The reason these clashes were important is because they helped shape Union protocol in other campaigns. The campaign for the Shore also stands out as an example of a fairly bloodless fight. This exemplifies the Union's true capabilities in the first year of the Civil War which were overshadowed by glorious Confederate victories. This thesis also argues that the Atlantic and Chesapeake, which virtually surrounded the Shore, played an important role in the way it fought the war. Rather than detract from its significance by isolating it, these waters added to its role. Southern and Northern sympathizers found ways to aid the South and the North via the Chesapeake Bay and the Atlantic Ocean. Lastly, this survey argues that the Shore underwent an almost unprecedented occupation by Union forces which created a peaceful, yet resentful enclave of Southern territory. The Eastern Shore of Virginia, isolated and alone, found itself far away from military action after 1861 although it bordered the most important region of the war. Yet from 1862 to 1865 the Shore became engulfed with a war of its own.

### A Critique of the Literature

The current state of literature on the Eastern Shore and the Civil War is stagnant but well rounded. Most secondary sources predate 1950. Yet, only oral and genealogical histories have come out of the present. A secondary source predating 1950 that has probably impacted the literature more than any other source is James Mears' The Virginia Eastern Shore in the War of

Secession and in the Reconstruction Period. Mears' book is unabridged and complete in its storytelling, which makes it indispensable as a basis for further exploration. Mears included military, maritime and social history. Another example is Eric Mills' Chesapeake Bay in the Civil War. This book, the most current publication regarding something akin to this study is close in methodology to this thesis. Mills moved chronologically, cited military and social events while also using the Chesapeake region to connect the various events and people. Unlike Mills, however, this thesis will discuss only the Shore.

Also key to this study is a regimental history of the 39<sup>th</sup> Virginia Infantry, the only Confederate regiment formed on the Shore. Well researched and full of information, this work by G. L. Sherwood and Jeffrey C. Weaver is a basis for any military study of the Shore in 1861. Another scholastic work is Revival's Children: A Religious History of the Eastern Shore, by Kirk Mariner. This study includes short histories of every church and often cites events from the Civil War. The secondary oral and genealogical sources referred to contain many short tales and stories that were written more for entertainment purposes than scholarly purposes. Examples include Kirk Mariner's True Tales of the Eastern Shore and Drummondtown: A One Horse Town, by L. Floyd Nock. The book serves as a historical and architectural tour guide through the small town, providing many important tidbits on the Civil War such as the uses of homes by Federal troops and backgrounds of the town's residents.

In the secondary literature examined, most writers fall into a master narrative or storytelling mode when answering this question. Although very useful for telling history, narratives often leave little room for analysis of people, places, and events with a bias or intent.

One book that is a complete history of the Shore from 1603 to 1964 gives the Civil War less than ten pages!

In short, writers include a few key facts and move on. This self-defeating interpretation is not conducive to further study. The sources authors consulted for these works mostly include family histories, manuscripts, and court documents. Except for Mills and Mears, these social histories did not incorporate newspapers, or state and federal records regarding the actions of the Confederate and Union soldiers and civilians in the Chesapeake. The mindset that the Shore is insignificant caused many authors to look for the odd and unusual in order to set the Shore apart. Yet it is highly unlikely that Union authorities considered the Shore unimportant, since the Official Records of the War of the Rebellion delegated over 200 pages to it.

Primary sources include family papers, diaries, inventories, receipts, journals, letters, trials, laws, wills, censuses, proclamations, battle summaries, newspapers, and magazines. Four places hold these sources: the Eastern Shore Public Library in Accomac, the Virginia Historical Society in Richmond, Small Special Collections Library at the University of Virginia, and the Library of Congress in Washington, D. C.

A variety of primary sources encompass personal stories. Nathaniel J. W. LeCato, an officer of the 39<sup>th</sup> Virginia, wrote a satiric autobiographical novel. Tom Burton; or the Days of '61 told his story of the Union invasion of the Shore. Union General John A. Dix also wrote his memoirs, which discussed the invasion as well. Gen. Lockwood's papers exist in manuscript form in the National Archives.

Prominent officers and families aside, stories about wage-earning adventurers also endure. Middle class blockade runners left their clues in letters, business transactions, and personal papers.

































































































































































































