



Farmville - Prince Edward Historical Society

P.O. Box 546
Farmville, Virginia 23901

August, 2011



Munitions found by the Petrakos and Brooks men at one of the High Bridge forts in the early 1960's.

Artillery at High Bridge Fort

Presented by
Bill Graham

**Tuesday, August 16, 2011
7:00 p.m.
Farmville Train Station**

Board meets at 6:00 p.m.

W. L. Graham Discusses the Artillery at High Bridge Fort

The story of High Bridge began in 1852 when the South Side Railroad built it across the broad and shallow Appomattox River valley. With the outbreak of the Civil War, all railroads across the South were of major importance to the transportation system of the Confederacy.

High Bridge, a timber structure sitting atop 24 brick piers, was 2,400 feet long and 160 feet high with rail tracks and pedestrian walks on each side of the track. The tarred pine

structure was protected from the rain by sheet metal laid under the tracks.

Due to its size, the Confederacy realized that to replace it during war time would be costly and time consuming and perhaps impossible. Early in 1862, four fortifications or rectangular redoubts were constructed, one on each side of the railroad at each end of the bridge.

Stationed at the garrison were Colonel Richard A. Booker's 3rd Virginia Reserves and a detachment of Richard's Battalion of Artillery under Major Victor Maur [Maurin]. There were 350 officers and men, of whom 43 were artillery men. The garrison was armed with at least 21 cannons and needed ammunition for defense. These troops spent months watching and waiting as the war waged on.

High Bridge saw two days of action on April 6 and April 7, 1865. Confederate troops, weary from fighting their way from Richmond to Sailor's Creek crossed High Bridge and the wagon bridge below. As the last crossed, the retreating troops set fire to both bridges. Union troops were able to stamp out the fire on the wagon bridge before severe damage was done; however, several spans of the rail bridge burned before it was extinguished.

Our speaker Bill Graham's connection to Farmville goes back to his childhood when his grandparents went shopping there. He has long been a student of the American Civil War. He recently retired from the military with over 20 years experience, five of which were in active duty in field artillery. He lives in Powhatan with his wife, Laura and they have three children. He is a mathematics teacher in the City of Richmond Public Schools and engages in agricultural pursuits as a hobby.

High Bridge Trail Indian Summer Walk, Thursday, August 11

High Bridge Trail State Park continues its series of historical interpretive programs with an Indian Summer Walk on Thursday, August 11, starting at 7 p.m. The Park's AmeriCorps volunteer, Bob Flippen and special guest Dr. James W. Jordan, will lead a short walk from the Farmville train station past Buffalo Creek to a point in sight of the Smith-Taylor Mound pointing out historical attractions along the way including the N&W Passenger Station, Stanley Park, Farmville-Powhatan Railroad, the Junction Canal and the Indian Mound.

After the walk, participants are invited inside the train station to cool off with some lemonade, courtesy of the Friends Group of the High Bridge Trail and enjoy a slide show with Indian relics presented by Dr. Jordan about the Smith-Taylor Mound excavation conducted in the early 1980s.

The Friends Group of the High Bridge Trail will have available raffle tickets for the grand prize honor of being the first to walk across High Bridge when it is opened to the public in the spring of 2012.



Seventy walkers enjoyed a stroll on High Bridge Trail along a portion near River Road as AmeriCorps volunteer Bob Flippen talked about events that happened between High Bridge and Farmville.

This Day in August in Prince Edward County History

- 8-1-1922** Death of prominent Prince Edward tobacco merchant Walter Grey Dunnington, owner of Poplar Hill
- 8-2-1897** Civil rights activist W. E. B. DuBois studies Prince Edward County's black population for U.S. Labor Commission report
- 8-4-1851** Francis Carr and Christian Ehrman contracted with the Southside Railroad to build the High Bridge original wooden superstructure.
- 8-4-1899** Edward Wiltse, jeweler and silversmith, died
- 8-4-1922** J. C. Brickert seeks location at Third and Randolph streets to locate Farmville's first service station
- 8-5-1942** First daylight air raid test
- 8-8-1907** Prince Edward Hotel opened
- 8-8-1952** Farmville Drive-in opened on Route 15 just south of Farmville
- 8-10-1993** By-laws adopted for Rural Education Foundation, creating the Fuqua School that replace Prince Edward Academy
- 8-14-1902** Work commences to build Norfolk & Western station
- 8-14-1945** County-wide nighttime celebrations for end of World War II
- 8-17-1947** WFLO went on the air
- 8-18-1913** Henry Lindsey elected Fire Chief
- 8-19-1962** Sayler's Creek Battlefield Park dedicated
- 8-20-1969** Hurricane Camille brings flooding to Farmville
- 8-24-1884** Farmville Lithia Springs incorporate
- 8-26-1867** Prince Edward resident and nationally-recognized educator Robert Rousa Moton born in Amelia County
- 8-27-1894** Gov. O'Ferrall arrives for visit to Farmville
- 8-27-1909** Farmville Silver Band's first open air concert
- 8-30-1895** The Confederate Monument Association organized
- 8-30-1905** Partial eclipse of the sun witnessed

Teenage Relic Hunters Find Munitions at High Bridge Fort in 1960-1961

One summer day in 1960, Mike Petrakos and Tom Brooks, fourteen-year-old Farmville boys, went out on a day's hike through backwoods near High Bridge and stumbled upon a find of a life-time. Finding an old fort, the boys began to explore it. They had carried a small army entrenching tool and began to chop around in the fort's moldy ground. When it clanked into solid metal, the boys went to work digging and scratching and cleaning to find a twenty-pound, brass-bottomed, fully armed Confederate Parrot shell.

As the days passed and the boys continued their treasure hunt, George Petrakos, Mike's father, became interested. By the spring of 1961, the three with occasional help from Tom Brook's father and younger brother were searching the old fort with a \$45 mine detector, vintage World War II.

"Soon the ground was pocked with holes from one to two feet deep where the diggers had found single shells, still relatively close to the surface. But they found in some spots whole nests of shells and the deeper they dug the more there seemed to be. The going was getting rough now; some of the holes were deeper than six feet in the gummy red clay and still the detector's probing beam said there was more, much more, treasure farther down. Small earth slides began to pester the diggers and for safety they began shoring up the deep shafts with timbers.

"After each days' digging they would load the projectiles in George Petrakos' old station wagon and return to Farmville where the loot would be divided evenly among those who worked that day.

"By fall, the phenomenal total of approximately 800 cannon projectiles had been removed from the fort. There was a virtually uncountable number of small canister and grape shot, plus a quantity of cannon primer, but the amount of personal equipment (highly prized brass belt buckles, for example) was disappointingly small. A few bayonets, musket barrels, and cartridges boxes were unearthed. Probably the most curious single find was an antique whistle.

"With roughly four tons of century-old metal on hand the relic hunters obviously had a storage problem, so they began selling off much of the material to antique shops and military relic collectors. Some they traded for guns, swords, buckles, and other Civil War rarities. Depending on the scarcity of the projectile and the eagerness of the buyer, the selling price range of cannon projectiles fluctuated between \$2.50 and \$12."

This story continues in "The Iron Treasure of High Bridge" by J.S. Wamsley on the Virginia Civil War Relics site on the Internet.

More details about the treasure find can be gleaned from the archives of *The Farmville Herald* in the August 9, 1960 edition and the July 28, 1961 edition.

Bob Flippen Speaks on High Bridge Construction

Want to lean more about High Bridge then and now? Bob Flippen, who has worked as a AmeriCorps volunteer this summer on High Bridge Trail State Park, will present an unique slide presentation complete with original photographs taken by

Willis W. Vail of the construction of the iron bridge that replaced the wooden bridge of the Civil War era.

Be sure to mark your calendar for September 20, to see these previously unknown and unpublished photos taken by Vail and learn about this massive construction project.