

Mount Pony (Signal Hill)

“Culpeper’s Most Significant Mountain”

Two predominant theories offer clues to the naming of the formidable peak one early settler termed the “Glory of Culpeper County.” The first hypothesis—certainly factual—is that the prominence is named after the Saponi Indians (now extinct), an eastern Siouan tribe occupying Virginia’s central Piedmont in the 1600’s.

The second conjecture for the summit’s naming—less plausible, fortunately—suggests that early inhabitants viewed the gentle, rolling crest as resembling a plate of “corn pone” (cornbread). So it is argued by some with a culinary bent that the moniker of “Mount Pone ” refers to an ordinary baked product. But try as I might, this former farm boy cannot discern when looking at Mount Pony a pan of crusted cornbread, from any angle.

The earliest reference mentioning the mountain is credited to Charles Carter of King George County, who in leasing a portion of his large Culpeper holdings in 1741, referred to the “Mount Pone tract.” An ensuing lease reveals that in 1745, Robert and John Spotswood leased 200 acres “at Mount Poni,” for growing tobacco, a staple cash crop of pre-war Culpeper.

The peak we know as Mount Pony has in fact been referred to over the years by many diverse names:

- o Mount Pone
- o Mount Poni
- o Mount Pony
- o Mount Poney
- o Mt. Pony
- o M. Pony
- o Pony Mountain (by Union soldiers, mostly)
- o Battle Mountain (by Civil War soldiers on both sides)
- o Signal Hill (a term frequently utilized by Civil War soldiers)

Union descriptions of “Pony Mountain”

It is interesting to note that most Union Civil War maps of Culpeper County identify the summit as “Pony Mountain.” Additionally, Northern reports, letters, diaries, news articles, etc., describe the event of the moment as occurring at Pony Mountain or “Signal Hill,” not Mount Pony. Perhaps it is the case that the first Federal topographical engineer to arrive in Culpeper with General John Pope’s Army of Virginia in 1862 preferred “Pony Mountain” and the entire Union nation obliged by adopting *his* designation.

Confederate descriptions of Mount Pony

Alternatively, Confederate maps and documentary references usually describe the peak as Mount Pony or Mt. Pony. The premier Confederate map of Culpeper County (Col. J.F. Gilmer, 1863) sketches “Mount Poney.” General Robert E. Lee’s post-Rappahannock Station battle map of November 8, 1863, depicts “Mt. Pony.” Further, a worn, discolored map General Jeb Stuart carried on his person in 1863-1864 (until his death) illustrates “M. Pony.” (This writer retains a copy, from the original.)

Location of Signal Station on Signal Hill

Because of its *continual* use as a signal station by both sides throughout the war, the 791’ summit of Mount Pony was also simultaneously called “*Signal Hill*” by each army. The location of the principal signal station post utilized by Rebs and Yanks was not positioned—as one would assume—on the highest point of the peak, which of course overlooks the town of Culpeper. In fact, the stout rock/wooden signal platform—built by Confederates in 1861 and improved by the Federals—was erected on top of a shelf situated on the eastern portion of the summit as it slopes toward the Rapidan. A flat rock ledge identifies the location of the signal station today. One can in fact climb on this shelf and observe in bold relief all points of the compass, except straight west. The view is marvelous in the extreme.

Mount Pony named for sculpture on summit? (No)

A mistaken rumor prevails that Mount Pony is named for a mysterious bas-relief pony sculpture situated deep within a rock cleft near the southeast crest. This argument proposes that Indians crafted this work of art; in fact, Piedmont Indian tribes did not retain horses prior to colonial settlement. This magnificent carving—which few have viewed—is no doubt the creation of an encamping soldier, probably a signalman assigned to the Army of the Potomac during the winter of 1863-1864.

This refined sculpture—eternally protected from the weather due to its deep location in a rock crevice—manifestly postdates the 1700's naming of "Mount Pone." Most probably, the soldier carving this work of equine art—whoever he was—purposed to honor the campsite he knew as "Pony Mountain." We wish we knew who he was so that his name could be recorded in Culpeper's historical record alongside the title, "gifted artist."

A unique and "glorious" monadnock

Before we delve into historical events occurring at Mount Pony, it is relevant to point out that our own abrupt volcanic upheaval to the east is also geologically heralded as one of the few classic "monadnocks" in the United States. A monadnock (or isleberg) is an isolated hill that, resisting erosion, rises abruptly from a level surrounding plain. As a unique monadnock, Mount Pony joins other distinguished American summits as Stone Mountain (Georgia); Rib Mountain (Wisconsin); Mount Katahdin (Maine) and Mount Monadnock in New Hampshire. It is noteworthy to mention there are still textbooks still being passed around today by grade school students accenting Mount Pony as one of our "glorious" American monadnocks.

Historical Events Occurring at or near Mount Pony

Mount Pony's first inhabitants

Prior to the arrival of Colonial settlers, Sioux Indians (Saponi; Mannahocks) and related tribes camped and hunted in large numbers between the Rapidan and Rappahannock Rivers. From the slopes of Mount Pony, Indians surveyed vast herds of bison, elk and deer. Indeed, huge quantities of animals were then available in such abundant numbers and diversity that we cannot begin to envision this bygone game-rich environment. With prey selected from upon high, Indian hunting parties stealthily crept down the slopes and cooperatively culled in their bounty. So to be fair about it, we must readily acknowledge that the summit we know as Mount Pony was both utilized and exalted by a proud people who preceded us—and who departed only after our sudden arrival upon their lands. In the beginning, it was *their* mountain.

The Baptists Arrive at Mount Pony

The historically significant Mt. Pony (or Mt. Poney) Meetinghouse, the new home of oft-persecuted Baptists, and the forerunner of today's Culpeper Baptist Church—was created in 1774 as an unheated, farm structure furnished by long wooden benches. The church took its name from the mountain rising immediately to its southeast. In 1777, land was purchased “for and behalf of the Baptist Brethren...and is the place whereon a Baptist meeting house is already erected and known by the name of Mount Poney meeting house.”

The modest church was situated at the foot of Mount Pony just north of Kirtley's Rolling Road (Rt. 3), a colonial byway connecting Stevensburg and Culpeper. The church served both white and black members, and devout services continued until 1833 when the church was discontinued. (Its location is today identified by a 1907 historic marker.) Some of the worshippers moved into Culpeper, and obviously proud of their historic linkage to Mount Pony, congregants still called their new church, “Mt. Poney Baptist Church,” *a proud name that lasted until 1892!*

The life and death of George Town

Just off Kirtley's Road and situated at the eastern base of Mount Pony once stood a "thrifty little hamlet" harboring pretensions of royal grandeur. Formed in 1793 and called "George Town," this village of a half dozen houses, a hotel and blacksmith shop, never really scored residential or commercial success—certainly because George Town was located less than two miles from Culpeper Court House. Most Civil War maps denote the hamlet of George Town, and one passing Union soldier derisively termed the village as a "town not worthy of its name." Much damaged during the war, George Town slowly sank into oblivion, with "little trace...left." A postwar observer noted with glum finality, "Its glory has departed."

Mount Pony's Significant Role in the American Civil War

Confederates arrive.

Why the military significance of Mount Pony?

In February 1862, war came to Culpeper County when General Joseph Johnston's Confederate army transferred into Culpeper from their prior defensive lodgment on the banks of the Bull Run in Prince William County. From that point onward, Mount Pony was utilized almost *continuously* as a signal station by both armies for the rest of this long and brutal war. At 791' in elevation, Mount Pony is of course not the tallest peak in Culpeper—that claim is held by Bald Mountain at 980' way out in the Gourdvine Neck. So not being the largest Culpeper peak, why did Mount Pony become the most important military signal station in the entire Civil War? As a real estate professional might today respond, the key to its military significance rests in Mount Pony's, "Location, location, location..."

As a large map of Culpeper County is unfolded, one discerns a triangular mass of land shaped somewhat like a piece of pie. At the top edge of the pie piece, the Rappahannock River courses southeast. The Rapidan River delineates the bottom slit of the pie wedge, and this waterway tracks in a northeastern direction to where it converges at the point with the Rappahannock, near Culpeper's eastern border. At the rear of the "pie piece," rests the piecrust, to wit, the lofty summits at Culpeper's western border leading up to the Blue Ridge Mountains.

Now with this local geography lesson in mind, gaze back upon your map. One thereupon observes a mile and a half-long ridge situated in the lower center of the county that tracks east-west fronting and overlooking the flat approaches, north and south, leading up from the Rappahannock and Rapidan Rivers. Not quite equidistant from both rivers (but close), Mount Pony lies ten miles from the former and six miles from the Rapidan. Vigilant Signal Hill scouts could and would immediately discover any army deploying in Culpeper from the usual north-south river approaches.

Adding to the ridge's preeminent topographical significance, the major east-west road of the day (Kirtley's Rolling Road, Rt. 3) defines Mount Pony's northern base and the principal north-south road of the era—the Carolina Road, present-day Rt. 663—intersects with Kirtley's at the important wartime village of Stevensburg, just beyond the ridge's eastern slope

Last, but not least, Mount Pony directly overlooks the shire town of Culpeper County, as well as the vital wartime Orange and Alexandria Railroad, just to the west of the summit. *Point of fact, Mount Pony, or Signal Hill, became the signal station most often utilized, for a greater duration of time during the Civil War than any similar signal position in any theater of action simply because the ridge was in the right place at the right time.* Indeed, location, location, location...

Signal Hill changes hands, numerous times

Yankees descend upon Culpeper County

As General Richard Ewell's gray clad division departed Culpeper (and Mount Pony) in April 1862 to join Stonewall Jackson's Valley Campaign, it did not take long for Signal Hill's elevated observation deck to receive new inhabitants—and these wore Yankee blue. General John Pope's Army of Virginia filed across the Rappahannock in July 1862, and the first thing Pope achieved was to take over the former Rebel signal station on Mount Pony so he could be forewarned of an enemy approach from the Rapidan. And it didn't take long for Federals on Signal Hill to alert their commander back at Brandy Station that big trouble was trudging their way.

Battle of Cedar Mountain

On August 8, 1862, General Stonewall Jackson advanced his 24,000 troops across the Rapidan to confront Pope's army. Immediately detecting the enemy movement, Signal Hill scouts urgently waved semaphore flags alerting General Pope to the danger. Pope quickly sent forward 9,000 men of the Union II Corps, and on August 9, the Battle of Cedar Mountain took place, resulting in a narrow Union defeat.

As the Army of Virginia pulled slowly back from Cedar Run, General Jeb Stuart ordered a cavalry detachment on August 10 to race forward and attempt to seize the Yankee signal station on Mount Pony. Clearly Stuart recognized the significance of Signal Hill, and once he seized the Yankee station, "Stuart would not only acquire information; he would deny information-gathering facilities to the enemy."

As a tactical goal, it was all well and good that Stuart's designated squadron charged forward to capture the Federal station on Mount Pony, but a problem resulted in fulfilling this ambition: The Yankees desired to retain Signal Hill. In sum, a brief fight broke out on the summit and the mounted troopers supporting the well-defended signal station unceremoniously threw Stuart's impetuous detachment back off the mountainside. Signal Hill remained in Union hands, but only temporarily.

2nd Manassas Campaign

Within ten days after the Yankees fought so stoutly to keep Signal Hill, the Federal signalmen up high calmly packed their flags and spyglasses and closed shop, while soon following the rest of the Army of Virginia back to the Rappahannock bluffs just inside Fauquier County. Before departing however, they confirmed by observation General Pope's separate intelligence report that the entire Army of Northern Virginia was advancing on Culpeper County from the south. As the Federals withdrew from Signal Hill, their "chairs were still warm" when Southern signalmen slid into their places on the towering wooden signal platform. (One imagines the Yankees demonstrated professional courtesy by not destroying the platform.)

As Robert E. Lee's army pounded through Culpeper County en route to executing a dramatic flanking march around John Pope's right flank, Signal Hill messages flashed down to General Lee informing him of Yankee defensive dispositions ten miles northward on the Rappahannock. Kept fully informed by his hilltop scouts of Pope's movements in western Fauquier County, Lee dispatched Jackson's command north through the Little Fork via Welford's Ford on August 22. Soon thereafter, General James Longstreet's command followed Jackson toward Jeffersonton. As Longstreet crossed Welford's Ford, the dutiful Rebel signalmen folded their flags and took their place at the rear of the long Confederate column headed toward impending victory over John Pope on the plains of Manassas.

Confederates return, post-2nd Manassas/Antietam Campaign

Fredericksburg Campaign

Following the brutal 2nd Manassas and Antietam (Sharpsburg) Campaigns, the Army of Northern Virginia returned to Culpeper and Mount Pony in October 1862. Southern signalmen tramped up the familiar wagon road to the crest of Signal Hill expecting to spend a cold winter on top of the wind-blown summit. But the Confederates did not winter in Culpeper as General Lee instead shifted his army over the Rapidan and headed toward Fredericksburg. There is solid evidence suggesting the Confederates left the Signal Hill station in place to cover the army's rear as Lee departed for the lower Rapidan. At any rate, the Fredericksburg Campaign was now underway, soon to result in a Confederate victory in December 1862.

Battle of Kelly's Ford

Following the Fredericksburg Campaign, Confederate cavalry moved back into Culpeper, as did Rebel signalmen who soon found themselves hunkered over their spotting glasses atop their Signal Hill station. On March 17, 1863, a Federal cavalry division stormed across Kelly's Ford and attacked General Fitz Lee's picket outpost at the ford. The signal station on Mount Pony immediately sprung into life and alerted responding cavalry officers of discernible details regarding the Union attack. This fierce battle continued unabated until the Federal cavalry finally withdrew at day's end.

Chancellorsville Campaign

In March, April and early May 1863, the Rebel signal station on Mount Pony functioned continuously as the Army of Northern Virginia remained in their trenches downriver at Fredericksburg. At the outset of the Chancellorsville Campaign, the signal station stood tall indeed when General Joe Hooker's Army of the Potomac began a wide strategic envelopment by way of Kelly's Ford in an attempt to turn Lee's left. As 60,000 Federal infantry splashed across the Rappahannock and headed resolutely toward Germanna's and Ely's Fords on the Rapidan, the alert Signal Hill station vitally supported Jeb Stuart's nearby cavalry at Brandy Station by carefully monitoring the enemy's bold, offensive advance.

As the Federal infantry continued downriver toward Orange County, Stuart's advance elements followed close behind and captured several Union stragglers. These gabby prisoners furnished important data augmenting the intelligence that Stuart already possessed regarding General Hooker's intention to attempt a decisive flanking movement. "The intentions of the enemy were now fully developed and this information was at once telegraphed to the commanding general," one of Stuart's officers recalled. There is no doubt that the early information provided by General Stuart—bolstered in no small measure by the Mount Pony signal station's observations—allowed General Lee to quickly respond to Hooker's grand but doomed movement. And in short order, General Joe Hooker would be soundly defeated at the Battle of Chancellorsville.

Battle of Brandy Station

Gettysburg Campaign

Immediately following the Chancellorsville Campaign, General Robert E. Lee disclosed a profound secret to the officer he trusted more than any man in his army, his cavalry commander, Maj. General Jeb Stuart. Lee privately informed the bold cavalier that the Army of Northern Virginia would soon head north across the Potomac and invest Pennsylvania, while concurrently attempting to lure the Federal army into a position whereupon Southern forces could defeat Union arms once and for all.

General Stuart was ordered to consolidate his 10,000-man cavalry division in Culpeper in mid-May 1863 to screen the arrival of Lee's infantry about to be withdrawn from Fredericksburg. Lee intended to secretly extract his infantry and artillery—about 60,000 men—from the hills behind Fredericksburg and shift them across the Rapidan to Culpeper. Once his army assembled around Culpeper Court House, Lee planned to advance his forces over the Blue Ridge, cross the Potomac and march to Pennsylvania where he deigned to contend at some advantageous site with the Northern army.

Soon learning of the ominous presence of Rebel cavalry in Culpeper in early June—posing a potential threat on Washington—General Joseph Hooker ordered his cavalry corps to “disperse and destroy the rebel force assembled in the vicinity of Culpeper.” At 4:30 A.M. on June 9, 1863, the 8th New York Cavalry slashed across Beverley's Ford on the Rappahannock and attacked sleepy pickets of the 6th Virginia Cavalry. The ensuing Battle of Brandy Station witnessed 20,000 troops engaged in deadly collision as Blue and Gray horsemen savagely fought out the largest cavalry action of the war.

Throughout the daylong battle, the Confederate signal station on Mount Pony flagged vital messages back and forth to widely separated cavalry forces as signalmen transmitted orders from General Stuart. Stuart in fact alerted General Lee in Culpeper Court House via Signal Hill that the Yankees had attacked his position. To ascertain further how the battle was going, General Lee and his staff trotted forward to Beauregard Farm where the army commander observed the battle's final moments.

At the conclusion of the long, bloody day, the Federals slowly withdrew, leaving most of their dead behind. This hotly-contested cavalry action—resulting in serious losses approaching 2000—not only marks the distinction of being the largest mounted combat of the entire war, but Brandy Station also inaugurated the extraordinary Pennsylvania Campaign, the war’s most consequential military undertaking. And the signal station on Mount Pony played an undeniably important role in the battle.

On the morning of June 10—with invasion plans delayed but a single day—Gen. Robert E. Lee directed his army northwest to the Potomac River. The rapidly converging Blue and Gray armies would accidentally clash near a small town in Adams County, Pennsylvania.

As the army departed Culpeper, Signal Hill officers and men broke up their camp and took their place in the line heading north.

Post-Gettysburg Movements:

Cavalry battles of August, September and October 1863

Bristoe Station Campaign

Battle of Rappahannock Station

Mine Run Campaign

Following the calamitous Gettysburg Campaign, Gen. Robert E. Lee’s dispirited but unbroken army returned in late July. Again taking up their familiar positions on Mount Pony, General Lee’s signalmen unfolded their flags and again went to work.

Newly emboldened Federal cavalry attacked across the Rappahannock on August 1 prompting General Lee to shift his infantry behind the Rapidan while leaving Stuart’s cavalry east of Brandy as a covering force. In mid-September, Union cavalry slashed toward Jeb Stuart’s division, with heavy fighting breaking out at Fleetwood Hill and on the front fields of Auburn Farm. On September 13, rapidly advancing Yankee cavalry pushed the Rebels back along the base of Mount Pony and through the streets of Culpeper Court House. A fierce fight broke out for control of Mount Pony.

Feeling the heat, Jeb Stuart's command (including the signalmen) withdrew to join Lee in Orange County. General George Meade's Federal army then pounded unmolested into Culpeper. Signal Hill again sprang to life and Federal glasses peered southward. Within a few weeks, Mount Pony semaphores flashed the alert, "The Rebs are coming!"

In October 1863, a fast moving Confederate army slipped across the Robinson River deigning to turn the Union right flank in Culpeper. Stuart's cavalry led the way as a wild, vicious fight developed on Sunbright Farm, around Bel Pre, and on the fields and slopes of Auburn, Beauregard and Fleetwood Hill. With his cavalry covering the Union retreat, General Meade pulled back over the Rappahannock and the subsequent Bristoe Station Campaign resulted in yet another stout Rebel defeat.

With Lee's personal affinity for Culpeper redundantly signaled by the pattern of regrouping the Southern army in Culpeper after successive forays, Lee's command unsurprisingly returned to the county in late October. Signal Hill was of course again manned immediately. Lee implemented a defensive alignment along the river centered near Rappahannock Station (Remington). On November 7, the Army of the Potomac aggressively rushed the Rebels, resulting in the brutal Battle of Rappahannock Station—Lee lost more than 1500 men in a stinging defeat, the third disaster in a row.

On November 8, General Lee established a battle line straight through Culpeper's center with Lee's right on Mount Pony's crest, his center lodged east of the Court House at Inlet Station and the Confederate left anchored near Chestnut Forks (Catalpa). Lee boldly offered battle to Meade but the latter, wisely, did not take the bait.

General Lee withdrew his army over the Rapidan, departing Culpeper County—for the last time. Meade's army once again took sole custody of Culpeper County. Blue uniforms again occupied Mount Pony's signal station. On Thanksgiving Day, 1863, Meade traversed the lower Rapidan wherein he initiated the Mine Run Campaign. Upon observing the staunch Rebel defenses hovering formidably above Mine Run in Orange County,

Meade chose not to attack and instead pulled back into Culpeper in early December, whereupon he ordered his army into winter encampment.

Winter Encampment of the Army of the Potomac, 1863-1864

During the winter encampment of the Army of the Potomac in 1863-1864, Signal Corps Headquarters was positioned on Signal Hill. To the southeast of Mount Pony, an auxiliary station covered the Union left from “Stony Point,” near present-day Batna. Cedar Mountain garrisoned another temporary station and further south, Garnett’s Mountain (“Bald Pate”) overlooked Southern pickets on the Robinson River. Two other stations nearer the Rapidan were used infrequently due to fear of attack. These were the Buzzard Hills—termed “the Bubbies” by homesick soldiers. (Go gaze upon them from the west, say from Rt. 614, and you’ll discover why!); and Thoroughfare Mountain, near James City.

The chief signal station on Signal Hill, commanded by Capt. Lemuel Norton, coordinated and managed traffic between each subordinate signal station, located at the following venues: 1st Corps station at Culpeper Court House, near present-day Rt. 3 and the railroad cut east of town; 2nd Corps on both Hansborough’s Ridge and Cole’s Hill; 3rd Corps on southern Fleetwood Hill; 5th Corps atop the bluffs above Rappahannock Station; 6th Corps upon northern Fleetwood Hill. Army headquarters signal station was stationed atop Fleetwood Hill’s center ridge, with army commander Gen. George Meade’s Headquarters situated nearby on a Fleetwood Hill spur.

From atop these outlying signal stations, Union corps commanders garnered timely, valuable intelligence of enemy troop activity across the Rapidan. And momentously, it was from atop Signal Hill that the Army of the Potomac received confirming orders on May 4, 1864 to depart Culpeper County for the Rapidan—and subsequently march into a dark, foreboding and deadly region both armies came to know as “The Wilderness.”

Signal Hill finally goes dark

Although the war still had a year to go, the Signal Hill station mostly remained devoid of signal activity considering full-scale warfare had finally departed Culpeper County—the county in this country most heavily impacted by the Civil War. That noted, a Yankee raiding party of 325 troopers entered the county on September 19, 1864 en route to Rapidan Station. On their return from pulling down some telegraph wires and tearing up railroad tracks at Rapidan Station, the Federals got much more than they bargained for when they ran into “several hundred well-entrenched” Rebels on Mount Pony.

Defending their homeland, the enraged Rebels caused serious Federal casualties, encouraging the Yankees to “flee in panic.” This action on September 20, 1864 is especially noteworthy simply because on this date, Mount Pony witnessed the end of its long war, forever.

We’ll leave the last word to a signalman from Maine, a sergeant in the Signal Corp of the Army of the Potomac who wintered atop Mount Pony in 1863-1864. “Looking back on my frequent service in Culpeper County during the war, I came to love that big old hill we camped on for so long a time. And as many times as we returned there, Signal Hill was to me Culpeper’s most significant mountain.”

And so it is...

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