

Fort Stevens July 12, 1864

“The scream of such a ball as it rapidly pierces the air, so well known to any old soldier, and its dangerously close proximity impelled the President to involuntarily diminish the height of his personage, which he did by suddenly crooking his knees.”

From letters, accompanied by the diagram at right, from Dr. C.C.V. Crawford, a surgeon who was wounded while standing next to President Abraham Lincoln at Fort Stevens.

The ever-resourceful Confederate leader Robert E. Lee determined to break Grant's siege of Richmond and Petersburg by dispatching a raiding column to reoccupy the Shenandoah Valley breadbasket and then knife northward into Maryland, circle around and threaten if not outright capture Washington. Almost in the 11th hour, White, the 102nd and the VI corps became the chosen Union veterans sent to counter Lee's thrust into the national capital region. The campaign would pit Jubal A. Early – “Old Jube” – against Generals Sedgwick's and Getty's successor, Major General Horatio G. Wright. White and his comrades would soon have their own rendezvous with destiny.

Wright and two divisions of the VI Corps (the third having gone earlier to Baltimore to protect the Baltimore and Ohio railroad on the Monocacy River in central Maryland,) embarked from City Point on transports July 10, reaching Washington and an eternally grateful Lincoln the next afternoon. Old Abe supposedly greeted the “Greek Cross fellas” (as the rebels styled them due to their distinctive VI Corps hat badge) while munching hardtack. But White remembered only meeting an old convalescing comrade when he came ashore. The comrade alerted him to the dire straits out in the suburbs. Indeed, in what must be considered the pivotal battle that summer (for the capital, survival of the Lincoln administration and the war effort), the 102nd and White slogged through the dust and heat out to the northern defense perimeter of the city, where an ersatz army of dismounted cavalry veterans, militia-reservists and even civilian volunteers from Washington bureaus stymied Old Jube's rebels. The place was Fort Stevens – to the east of White's unit's old camping grounds of three years before at Tennytown. Even there, the forts were under



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President Lincoln on the parapet of Fort Stevens where he came under enemy fire and Surgeon Crawford of the 102nd is wounded while standing next to him.

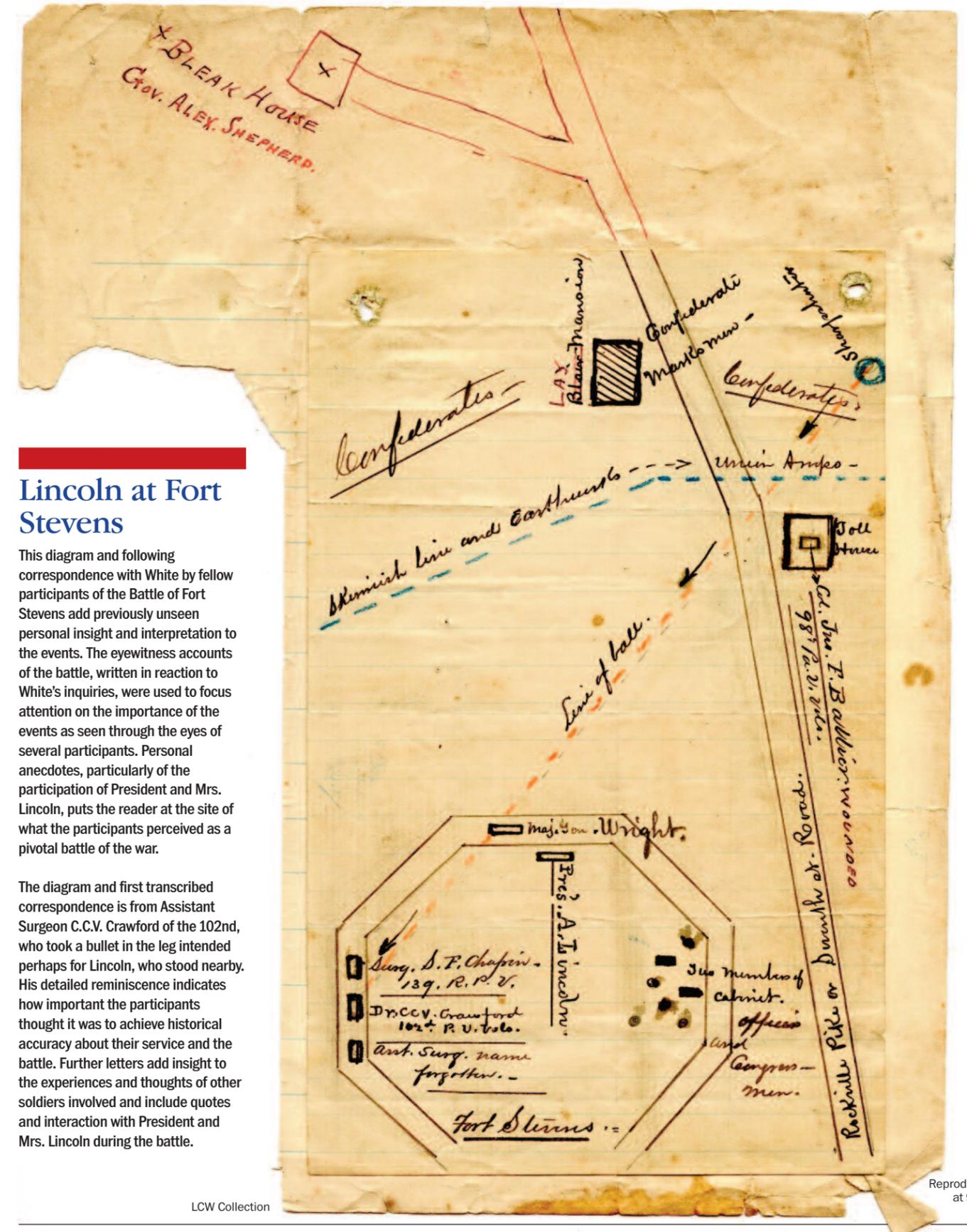
attack and soon demanded the 102nd relieve a hard-pressed skirmish line on July 11.

Arrival of the VI corps built upon the morning's denial of success to Early. There would be no breakthrough and capture of Washington City, the national treasury and perhaps the president himself. The next afternoon, Tuesday, July 12, with President Lincoln present and under enemy fire, the high command mounted a counterattack, but Wheaton's brigade with White and the 102d were once more held in reserve. Still, White remembered well the old toll house at the junction of the Seventh Street and Piney Branch roads – so well that after the war he returned, purchased the place and built a house on the battlefield where he would live for the rest of his life – “fighting the battles over again.” Perhaps it was here too that subconsciously he related to the regiment's most memorable casualty. Atop Fort Stevens' parapet that afternoon, Assistant Surgeon C.C.V Crawford of

the 102nd took a bullet in the leg, intended perhaps for Lincoln, who stood nearby. This close brush with a sharpshooter's long-range Enfield rifle nine months before the assassin's bullet at Ford's Theater would lead to White's determination decades later to help preserve a decaying fort and all but forgotten battle, but one holding so many possibilities. What if Lincoln had been shot that election summer of 1864 at Fort Stevens? Would it have brought peace with the Confederacy intact, slavery once again the law of the land, and would American history have been inalterably changed from that point forward? As it was, a circle of 41 headstones in nearby Battleground National Cemetery today as well as the preserved Fort Stevens rampart where Crawford and the president attracted rapt Confederate sharpshooters' attention, attest to the meaning of this place that later transfixed Lewis Cass White.

Benjamin Franklin Cooling

A diagram of Fort Stevens, locating the confederate sharpshooter and President Lincoln. Drawn by Surgeon C.C.V. Crawford, who was wounded standing next to Lincoln, it was sent to White along with the following transcribed correspondence.



Lincoln at Fort Stevens

This diagram and following correspondence with White by fellow participants of the Battle of Fort Stevens add previously unseen personal insight and interpretation to the events. The eyewitness accounts of the battle, written in reaction to White's inquiries, were used to focus attention on the importance of the events as seen through the eyes of several participants. Personal anecdotes, particularly of the participation of President and Mrs. Lincoln, puts the reader at the site of what the participants perceived as a pivotal battle of the war.

The diagram and first transcribed correspondence is from Assistant Surgeon C.C.V. Crawford of the 102nd, who took a bullet in the leg intended perhaps for Lincoln, who stood nearby. His detailed reminiscence indicates how important the participants thought it was to achieve historical accuracy about their service and the battle. Further letters add insight to the experiences and thoughts of other soldiers involved and include quotes and interaction with President and Mrs. Lincoln during the battle.

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