

# ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

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## Ball's Bluff: A Very Nice Little Military Chance

By James A. Morgan III

### Resources

If you can read only one book

Author	Title. City: Publisher, Year.
Morgan III, James A.	<i>A Little Short of Boats: the Battles of Ball's Bluff and Edwards Ferry, October 21-22, 1861.</i> El Dorado Hills, CA: Savas Beatie, 2011.

### Books

Author	Title. City: Publisher, Year.
Ballard, Ted.	<i>Battle of Ball's Bluff: Staff Ride Guide.</i> Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 2001.
United States War Department.	<i>War of the Rebellion: Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies.</i> (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), Series I, volume 5 (Material on Ball's Bluff).
Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War.	<i>Report of the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War in Three Parts: Part II Bull Run- Ball's Bluff,</i> H.R. Rep. No. 37-. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1863 (Material on Ball's Bluff).

## Organizations

Organization Name	Description, Contact information including address, email
Friends of Ball's Bluff Battlefield	This is a fund-raising and support group affiliated with Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority which owns the Ball's Bluff Battlefield Regional Park. Jim Morgan is chairman of this group and is the contact for questions or further information You can join their Facebook group at <a href="http://www.facebook.com/pages/Friends-of-the-Balls-Bluff-Battlefield/282265471873554">http://www.facebook.com/pages/Friends-of-the-Balls-Bluff-Battlefield/282265471873554</a>

## Web Resources

URL	Name and description
<a href="http://www.civilwar.org/battlefields/ballsbluff.html">http://www.civilwar.org/battlefields/ballsbluff.html</a>	Civil War Trust Ball's Bluff page
<a href="http://www.nvrpa.org/park/ball_s_bluff/content/history">http://www.nvrpa.org/park/ball_s_bluff/content/history</a>	Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority, Ball's Bluff Battlefield Regional Park

## Other Sources

Name	Description, Contact information including address, email
Thomas Balch Library	History and genealogy library in Leesburg, VA; extensive collection of Ball's Bluff materials. 208 West Market Street Leesburg, VA 20176 (703) 737-7195.

## Scholars

Name	Email
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## Topic Précis

The Battle of Ball's Bluff, October 21, 1861, was a simple accident that resulted from a faulty report provided by an inexperienced officer who led a reconnaissance patrol and thought he saw something that was not there. Confederate Colonel Nathan "Shanks" Evans had 3,000 men near Leesburg Virginia when Federal forces began building up at Langley, 25 miles east of Leesburg, numbering about 24,000 men. The federal forces advanced towards Evans' position. On the night of October 20 a small union patrol crossed the Potomac River at Balls Bluff led by Captain Chase Philbrick who reported seeing an unguarded Confederate Camp, mistaking trees for tents and failing to take steps to verify that a camp was indeed there. Union Brigadier General Charles Stone decided to mount a raid on the camp. About 400 Union troops of the 15<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts Regiments were ferried across the river in three small boats on the night of October 20-21, about 35 at a time. At 6:00 a.m. as soon as it was light, the Union force advanced to attack the "camp". The Union colonel in charge of the raiding force, Charles Devens, discovered the error, sent an aide to report it to General Stone (on the other side of the river and three miles away) and waited for new orders. General Stone ordered the rest of the 15<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts to cross the river to support Devens and ordered Devens to advance towards Leesburg on an expanded reconnaissance mission. While these orders were being transmitted by aides riding between the general and the raiding party, Confederate forces had advanced and engaged Devens. Colonel Edward Baker, a U.S. Senator and one of Lincoln's closest friends, had been ordered to advance his 1<sup>st</sup> California Brigade towards Ball's Bluff and take command of all the Union troops in the area. Baker began sending troops across the river, remaining on the Maryland side looking for more boats. Not only did he not go to the battlefield but he put no one in overall command there. Meanwhile fighting continued sporadically between the two, roughly evenly matched forces on the Virginia side of the river. By late afternoon Baker had crossed the river and Devens had fallen back into a defensive position above the bluff. Here the Confederates assaulted the Union troops repeatedly. Sometime between 4:30 and 5:00 p.m. Colonel Baker was killed. Shortly before dusk the 17<sup>th</sup> Mississippi with 600-700 fresh troops arrived on the battlefield, advanced and broke the Federal line. Panic-stricken Federals rushed down the bluff to the river. Many were shot there or drowned trying to swim the river. More than half the union force became casualties, 223 killed, 226 wounded and 553 captured out of 1,700. The Confederates suffered 36 killed, 264 wounded and 3 captured. Though small by later standards the Battle of Ball's Bluff mattered in 1861. While Colonel Baker was primarily responsible for the loss, General Stone saw his career ruined. He was arrested and held for six months then released without charge, apology or explanation. Political pressure arising from the Union defeat at Ball's Bluff resulted in the creation of the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War.

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