

Charles Binns of Loudoun County

By Steve Meserve

As December 1863 turned into January 1864, it is possible that the most reviled man in Northern Virginia was a Loudoun County native named Charles Binns. Binns was a deserter, a soldier who had served briefly in the Confederate army before leaving for home; however, that in itself was not enough to earn him the hatred of his former compatriots. After two years of bloody warfare and two failed invasions of Northern territory, Confederate deserters were an increasingly common sight in Northern Virginia. Binns was a deserter from John S. Mosby's elite 43rd Battalion of Virginia Partisan Rangers. To make matters even worse, he was now working for the enemy. How a native Virginian from one of Loudoun County's most influential families came to turn his back on his homeland and his people, and the very character of the man, are matters that remain shrouded in mystery.

Charles Binns came from the best stock in Loudoun County. His grandfather and great-grandfather, both also named Charles, had served for 80 years as Clerk of the Loudoun County Court. His family was known worldwide for the agricultural institute they founded just north of Aldie. They were, in short, pillars of the Loudoun community; yet in 1854, Binns left Loudoun and moved to Fairfax County,

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where he married his cousin's widow, a woman 11 years his senior, who had several children by her first marriage.¹

When the Virginia legislature put the secession question to the voters on May 23, 1861, Binns voted with the majority of his neighbors in favor of severing the state's ties with the Union. His patriotism seems to have had limits, however. He did not enlist in the state's armed forces "except as a recruiter"² for more than two years. That changed late in June 1863 when he received warning that he was to be arrested by Federal authorities for his secessionist sympathies. That night, he left home in the company of his stepson, Dulany Richards, and three other men³ and went to Middleburg, where they joined Mosby's newly organized command.

Binns served with Mosby less than six months before deserting and offering his services as scout and guide to Col. Charles Russell Lowell, commander of the cavalry brigade of the Union XXII Corps. His precise reasons for deserting are unknown. In their history of Mosby's command, Mewborn and Keen say that he "deserted...to avoid arrest by Mosby,"⁴ but they do not record the charge against him. Unfortunately, neither do the members of Mosby's command who wrote memoirs of their service after the war.

James Williamson, whose 1896 *Mosby's Rangers* is considered one of the definitive histories of that storied unit, said only, "While on a drunken frolic, [Binns] committed some acts of rascality for which Mosby ordered his arrest. In order to escape the punishment he knew he deserved and which he feared Mosby would inflict, he deserted to the Federal camp in Fairfax."⁵ Neither Williamson nor any other author of known Mosby memoirs record exactly what the "acts of rascality" were. Binns himself said nothing about a crime or affront to

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1. Priscilla Beumee letter, Nov. 20, 1988, Thomas Balch Library (TBL), Leesburg, Va.
 2. Statement of Charles Binns dated Dec. 28, 1863. *Case Files of Investigations by Levi C. Turner and Lafayette C. Baker, 1861-1866*. Cunningham Memorial Library, Indiana State University.
 3. OR, Series I, Vol 27(3), pp. 491-492
 4. Hugh C. Keen and Horace Mewborn, 43rd Battalion Virginia Cavalry Mosby's Command, (1993). (Lynchburg, VA: H.E. Howard, 1993), p. 297
 5. James J. Williamson, *Mosby's Rangers*, (New York: Ralph B. Kenyon, 1896), pp. 110-111.

Mosby's discipline when he told investigating U.S. officers he "served [Mosby] five or six months, became tired of him and left him,"⁶ implying that the desertion was his idea and not prompted by any action or threat of Mosby's.

Long after the war, a veteran of Mosby's command who signed his letters "Confederate," wrote to the *Fairfax Herald* that the offense Binns committed was that, while on his way to join Mosby, he kidnapped two "free colored women, who lived in his neighborhood" and attempted to sell them into slavery. "But when Binns got South, his booty was taken from him; the Negro women were released and returned to their homes blessing their saviors and damning their captor. This was the last attempt to sell Negroes in Loudoun."⁷

It is an interesting tale, but it is undoubtedly not true. "Confederate" said this incident happened in July 1863, "when the battle of Gettysburg was in progress and Mosby's command was in Pennsylvania."⁸ What he does not say was that officers and men of the Army of Northern Virginia, in the course of that campaign, rounded up blacks in Pennsylvania and sent them south to be sold into slavery, regardless of whether they had been born slave or free.⁹ Mosby, with a band of approximately 30 men, though not traveling with the army, was in Maryland and Pennsylvania doing his own part in rounding up Northern livestock and blacks and returning them to Virginia. It is not likely that he would punish Charles Binns for an "offense" many Confederate officers were committing at the same time.

Moreover, the time frame is wrong for Mosby to have ordered Binns arrested for an offense he committed when he left Fairfax to join the Partisans. Binns joined Mosby on or about July 2, 1863 and did not desert until late October or early November, a full four months later.

6. Statement recorded May 24, 1864 after Binns was arrested on an unspecified charge. It was later dismissed when the investigators concluded, "There is no doubt of this man having rendered much service to the Gov't. as he has been a great annoyance to Rebel Virginians." *Case Files of Investigations by Levi C. Turner and Lafayette C. Baker, 1861-1866*. Cunningham Memorial Library, Indiana State University.

7. *Fairfax Herald*, April 23, 1909.

8. Ibid.

9. Ted Alexander, "A Regular Slave Hunt: The Army of Northern Virginia and Black Civilians in the Gettysburg Campaign," *North & South*, vol. 4, no. 7 (Sept. 2001), p. 87.

The wheels of John Mosby's summary justice did not turn quite that slowly.¹⁰

Descendants of Charles Binns tell a different tale. According to the family, Binns killed another of Mosby's men in a drunken brawl and fled to avoid the punishment he was sure his teetotaler commander would impose. Interestingly enough, the published record shows it was about this same time, late October 1863, that John Underwood, also of Fairfax County and one of Mosby's earliest recruits, "was killed by a deserter from the Confederate army."¹¹ Although no further details of Underwood's death are given in any of the Mosby records, Binns family tradition and accounts published by Mosby's men dovetail too neatly to be pure coincidence.

If, indeed, a drunken Charles Binns killed John Underwood, one of Mosby's favorite and most trusted scouts, it is no wonder he deserted rather than face his commander's wrath. Thus, it is not only possible, but also likely, that the deserter Williamson mentioned was a member of Mosby's own command—a fact Mosby would not have wanted to become public knowledge because he and all other partisan officers were already enduring increasingly harsh criticism from the army high command and the Confederate Congress for the lack of discipline in their outfits.¹² Earlier that year, Mosby had, in fact, had to go all the way up the chain of command to Secretary of War James Seddon to get permission to organize his men as partisan rangers contrary to the wishes of Generals Robert E. Lee and J.E.B. Stuart, who would have preferred to have him recruit a regiment for regular cavalry service.¹³ The status of all partisan units was tenuous, at best, in late 1863. With partisan ranger bands in increasing disfavor and the law authorizing their existence heading toward repeal in February 1864, Mosby had ample incentive to hide such a flagrant violation of military discipline as one of his men killing another during a "drunken frolic."

10. For comments on Mosby dispensing justice in the part of Virginia known as "Mosby's Confederacy," see Aristides Montiero, *War Reminiscences by the Surgeon of Mosby's Command* (1890), (Richmond, VA: C.N. Williams, 1890), pp. 93-94, and John Scott, *Partisan Life with Mosby* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1867), pp. 398-399.

11. Williamson, op. cit., p. 48.

12. OR, Series 1, vol. 27(2), p. 992.

13. OR, Series 1, vol. 25(2), p. 857.

Whatever his precise reason for leaving Mosby, Binns presented himself at the camp of the Second Massachusetts Cavalry on November 17, 1863, and offered his services to the United States government. Thomas H. Merry, a member of the Second's "California Battalion" and correspondent for the *Alta California*, a San Francisco newspaper, wrote that "[Binns] told [Col. Lowell] that, if he could promise him a pardon for his bad conduct in the past, he would make amends for it in the future, and would lead a party to a place where a lot of Mosby's guerrillas could be captured."¹⁴ Lowell sent a raiding party out the next day—100 men under the command of Captain W.M. Rumery of Co. H and Lieutenant J.W. Sim of Co. A, the famed "California One Hundred." They were gone for a week, making a sweep through Gum Springs, Aldie, Middleburg, Upperville, and Paris. The expedition was a huge success from the Northern point of view, returning with, "twenty-eight prisoners...about fifty horses, and thirty head of cattle belonging to persons on whose premises the rebels were found."¹⁵

In his report on this expedition, Col. Lowell noted: "The deserter Binns proved of great assistance. As I wish to employ him again on similar work, and he shows no unwillingness to expose himself, I recommend he be allowed the same pay as other government scouts while in my employ."¹⁶ His request was approved by XXII Corps headquarters, and Binns was hired "with compensation at the rate of one Ration and \$50 per month."¹⁷ For the rest of that winter, Binns was a busy man, leading more expeditions into the heart of Mosby's Confederacy, giving evidence against Southern sympathizers living inside the Union lines, and spending a brief period in the guardhouse after being accused of mistreating his stepdaughter, Priscilla Richards (a charge the investigating officer found to be without merit).

Although former Confederates are unanimous in their writings in condemning Binns as a coward, Union sources paint a much different picture. On December 22, Thomas Merry wrote: "Here I will remark

14. Thomas H. Merry, *Alta California*, January 5, 1864.

15. From a letter signed "Cadet," *Boston Journal*, November 28, 1863.

16. OR, Series I, vol. 29(1), p. 658.

17. Charles E. Binns pension file, National Archives, Pension Files 1861-1934.



Charles E. Binns, ca. 1890

en passant, that our boys 'go their whole pie' on Charley, for he has shown himself to be a brave and dashing fellow—qualities which ever win the admiration of a soldier, and, besides, he is true to our cause, and enthusiastic in its service."¹⁸

Binns' bravery would again be called into question, this time by Union and Confederate sources alike, after the disastrous "Anker's Shop" or "Second Dranesville" fight on his 32nd birthday, February 22, 1864.

Two days earlier, a detachment of the Second Massachusetts Cavalry, accompanied by a detail from the 16th New York, left their camp near Vienna "with a roving commission" to gather forage and search for rebels in Loudoun County. The expedition, consisting of 150 officers and men, was commanded by Capt. J. Sewell Reed, the man who had recruited the first company of Californians for service in the war in the east. Their guide was Charles Binns. Having been as far west as Leesburg, Reed and his men turned east again and camped on the evening of the 21st near Belmont Plantation, where they met another scouting party from the 13th New York. The next morning, the two detachments rode together for a short time, but soon separated, with the New Yorkers heading south while Reed and his men went east.

Reed did not know his camp had been scouted by Mosby himself the night before. The wily partisan commander then hurried to Guilford Station to arrange an ambush with approximately 150 of his men. Although he was taking precautions to avoid being surprised, Reed rode into Mosby's trap late that morning. When the smoke

18. *Alta California*, San Francisco, January 31, 1864.

cleared, 8 Union cavalymen, including Capt. Reed, were dead, 25 wounded, and 70 missing or captured. One of the missing was Charles Binns.

Capt. George Manning, who was wounded and captured that day, said their guide disappeared early in the fight. "Where Binn [sic] went the Lord only knows."¹⁹ Confederate sources were even less kind than that in commenting on Binns's disappearance. "Every effort was made to capture him," said James Williamson, "but mounted on a fleet horse he made off at the beginning of the fray and escaped."²⁰ The letter writer calling himself "Confederate" said, "When the fight began Binns took to his heels and never stopped running until he crossed the Potomac."²¹ George Turberville, another of Mosby's men, wrote that Binns "came near being captured, and only made his escape by crossing the river at Seneca. He (Binns) was so badly frightened at this fight that he never attempted to lead his new friends again."²² John Munson's record of the fight contains the strongest attack of all: "When the first shot was fired Charley started to run and was never heard of by the Californians or our men. It was said he stopped for one night in Winnipeg to get a bite and then went on towards the North Pole."²³

The Binns pension file tells a much different story. In his original application for a pension, Binns stated that "his horse was shot under him in an engagement with the Guerrilla Chief Mosby and his right knee was lacerated and badly injured." In support of this version of events, the physician who examined him in 1890 found "a smooth [scar] on the front of the right knee about 1 inch long and one-fourth of an inch wide."²⁴

Further support for the Binns version of his disappearance from the Anker's Shop fight can be found in the diary of Valorous Dearborn, a

19. George Manning, *National Tribune*, Washington, DC, August 18, 1910.
20. Williamson, op. cit., pp. 145-146.

21. *Fairfax Herald*, April 23, 1909.

22. Ibid.

23. John W. Munson, *Reminiscences of a Mosby Guerrilla* (New York: Moffat, Yard & Company, 1906), p. 90.

24. Report No. 2240 from the Committee on Invalid Pensions, submitted to the U.S. House of Representatives January 11, 1901. Charles E. Binns pension file, National Archives, Pension Files 1861-1934.

member of Co. A, Second Massachusetts Cavalry. Dearborn was one of the men who rode with Col. Lowell from Vienna to Dranesville to gather the wounded and collect the bodies of the Union dead. According to Dearborn, Binns was still in the vicinity of the battlefield two days later when the Union cavalry made its second trip to the area. On that expedition, the Californians were warned that 300 Confederate cavalymen had crossed Goose Creek intending to set up a second ambush. "Charly B...acting as guide [we] prepared to return to Camp through the woods. We left the pike and turned in the direction of the Potomac. After securing B...s horse and pursuing a round-about way we arrived at Camp soon after dark."²⁵

Apparently, Binns and his horse had both been wounded early in the fight. If Binns crossed the Potomac (which was less than two miles north of the battlefield) to escape, he was only one of more than 20 men who did so. From the fact that Dearborn mentioned "securing" the scout's horse on the 24th, however, it seems more likely that Binns abandoned his wounded horse and took to the heavy woods to escape capture and was still there when the relief column arrived.

Capt. Manning seems to have harbored some doubt about Binns's loyalty to the Union cause, referring to him as "a supposed deserter from Mosby's Rangers." In later years, "Confederate" would also claim the Yankees did not actually trust Binns and never again used him as a scout after the Anker's Shop fight. The loss of Capt. Reed and the disaster near Dranesville do not seem to have shaken Col. Lowell's confidence in him, however. On February 24, the same day Binns led Valorous Dearborn and his companions back to Vienna from Dranesville, his pay was increased from \$50 per month to \$2 per day.

Many years after the war, Brigadier General H.M. Lazelle, who had commanded the 16th New York Cavalry before succeeding Col. Lowell in command of the XXII Corps Cavalry Brigade, wrote to Binns: "My dear Binns:—I have just received your letter of the 15th instant, with inclosures [sic], and am much surprised at the statement that you were accused of treachery in leading the California Cavalry

25. Valorous Dearborn diary, unpublished, but available on the California Battalion website at <http://2mass.omnica.com/>, April 25, 2004.

battalion into a trap on the Leesburg Pike on the occasion of their defeat by Col. Mosby Feb. 22, 1864. So far as I know, you were never treated ungratefully, or accused of treachery, or imprisoned anywhere, or on any occasion. On the contrary, I know that you were always trusted, and that the most perfect confidence was placed in your statements as a loyal man. Your services were faithful, and your duties at all times were zealously performed."²⁶

The name of Charles Binns does not appear in any of the Mosby records after February 22, 1864; yet he remained in Federal service until April 27. Wherever he was, and whatever he was doing, he was no longer guiding expeditions into "Mosby's Confederacy." Binns himself may have offered a clue to his whereabouts for the months after the Anker's Shop fight in the course of his war of words with "Confederate" in 1909. In one of his responses to charges made by the former rebel, he quoted a testimonial Lazelle wrote on May 20, 1864: "I take pleasure in recommending to your favorable consideration Mr. Chas. Binns of Virginia. He has for the past five months served the United States most zealously as a guide and has rendered valuable service in this manner to the troops of this command and to this Cavalry Brigade. He is a gentleman and in my estimation one who can be depended upon for the good and faithful performance of such duty as he may be employed in. His arduous and dangerous service has always at the peril of life demonstrated this. He leaves this region of the country as Mosby the Guerrilla has offered a reward of \$5,000 for his life or person and a commission of 2d. Lieut. in his (Mosby's) command."²⁷

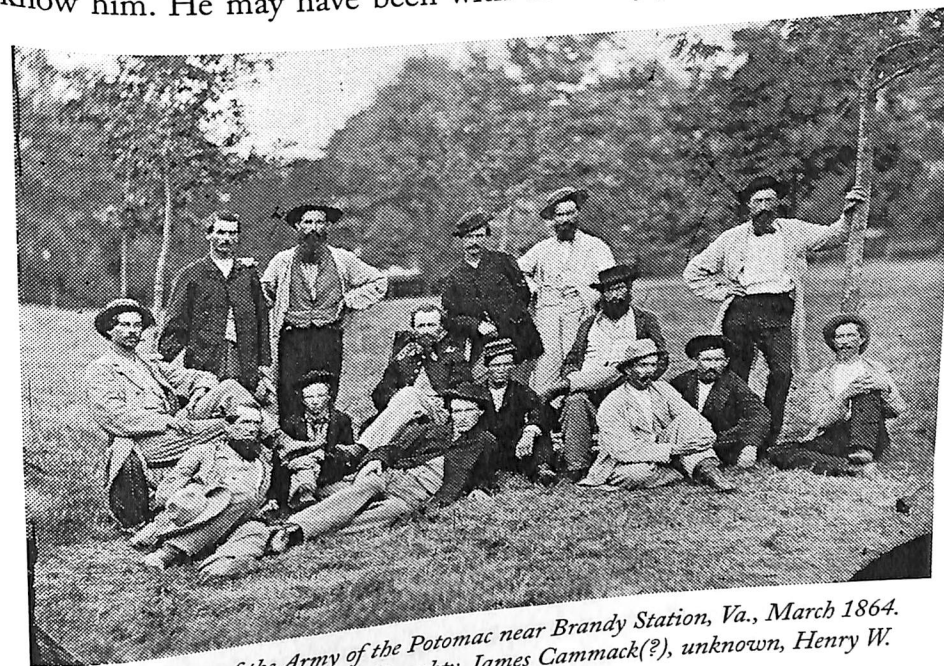
In his pension application and his postwar writings, Binns makes no claim of having served the Union anywhere other than in the Cavalry Brigade of the XXII Corps, and gives his dates of service as November 17, 1863 through April 27, 1864. It seems possible, however, that he at least considered taking a position as scout for the Army of the Potomac Cavalry Corps, in winter quarters near Brandy Station until the beginning of the Overland Campaign on May 4, 1864. A photograph of a group of army "scouts and guides" taken in March

26. Letter dated March 20, 1909 and cited in Binns's letter to the *Fairfax Herald* dated April 16, 1909.

27. *Fairfax Herald*, April 16, 1909.

1864 shows 15 men, 4 of whom are listed as "unknown" in the caption provided by the Library of Congress. One of those four bears an uncanny resemblance to an 1890 portrait of Charles Binns.

Once Mosby put a price on his head, Binns may have gone to Brandy Station with the idea of serving as a scout for some other Federal unit, but decided for some reason not to do so. Then again, he may have needed references before being accepted for such service. The endorsement he got from Col. Lazelle in late May seems to indicate an intention to apply for employment of that nature with men who did not know him. He may have been with the army just long enough to be



Cavalry scouts of the Army of the Potomac near Brandy Station, Va., March 1864.
Standing, left to right: James Doughty, James Cammack(?), unknown, Henry W. Dodd, unknown, unknown.
Seated: John Irving, Lt. Robert Klein, 3d Indiana Cavalry, Dan Cole.
On ground: Dan Plue, Lt. Klein's son, W. J. Lee, unknown, [] Wood, Sanford Magee, John W. Langdon.

The author believes that Charles Binns is the man standing second from right.
Civil War photographs, 1861-1865, compiled by Hirst D. Milhollen and Donald H. Mugridge, Washington, DC.: Library of Congress, 1977. No. 0270

photographed with a group of scouts before moving on. By late May, however, the carnage of the battles of the Wilderness and Spotsylvania was probably enough to convince him he was better off taking his chances with Mosby than with the Army of the Potomac.

In military records, Charles Binns disappeared after May 1864 and did not surface again until he applied for a veteran's pension in 1890 on the basis of the injury he received at Anker's Shop. By this time, Binns, who had returned to farming after the end of the war, stated that he was "totally unable to earn a support by manual labor by reason of rheumatism and injury and laceration of [his] right knee, received while in the U.S. service." He also said he was suffering from "weakness of eyesight, partial deafness of both ears, and resulting general debilitation." In other words, at age 60, Binns was beginning to suffer the infirmities of a far older man. By a special act of Congress, Binns finally received his pension on March 23, 1901. He was awarded \$12 per month in recognition of his "having been wounded while performing scout duty for the Union forces."²⁸

Binns again applied for a pension under the Pension Act of 1907. That application was rejected on June 3, 1907 on the basis of his having been "a civilian employee of the Quarter Master Department, U.S.A." rather than an enlisted member of a recognized military unit. Although he was not granted a new pension, he continued to collect the \$12 per month previously awarded him by Congress until his death.

Binns next came to the public's attention in 1904, when an article appeared in a local newspaper claiming the body of William Ormsby, a Union deserter executed in 1864, had been found by workmen leveling a new roadbed for the Alexandria and Loudoun Electric Railroad. Binns wrote to the paper explaining his reasons for believing the remains could not possibly be Ormsby's. This started a flurry of letters that would continue to appear in the paper from time to time for the next four years. In them, Binns denied ever having served with Mosby while his verbal assailant, who signed his letter "Confederate," repeatedly gave evidence to refute that claim and attacked Binns as a liar and a man of low character, both during and after the war.

28. Charles E. Binns pension file, National Archives, Pension Files 1861-1934.

Binns believed "Confederate" was actually Col. Mosby, who had, by that time, returned to Virginia after spending years in the West and as U.S. Ambassador to Hong Kong. The strongest argument against this, however, is that Mosby was never reluctant to engage in controversy over his own signature, as evidenced by the years he spent sparring with former Confederate General Beverly Robertson and the powerful Southern Historical Society over their blaming J.E.B. Stuart for the loss of the Battle of Gettysburg. A man willing to engage such influential opponents is not likely to have hesitated to use his own name in a verbal battle with a former Union cavalry scout.

By the time he died in 1919, Binns was totally blind and living in Washington, DC, with his son, having already buried two wives. Even death did not end his troubles with the government. As late as 1932, John Binns was still trying to collect money to pay for his father's funeral: money that was denied him with the old argument that Binns "was a civilian employee acting as a scout for the Federal Army, but that he was not enlisted in the United States Army. The fact that the deceased was pensioned by Special Act of Congress, [did] not affect his military status... [and] there [was] no amount payable on the claim."²⁹ Probably because he had to pay the \$155 funeral expenses out of his own pocket, John Binns never had his father's birth and death dates added to the tombstone that had been erected over the Binns gravesite when Mary Binns, his father's second wife, died in 1895. To this day, Charles Binns lies beneath a marker giving no more information about him than his name, although there is clearly space on the marble obelisk for additional data. Perhaps that is appropriate that a man whose contemporaries tried so hard to reduce to one-dimensional obscurity should continue to be shrouded in mystery and unanswered questions in death.

29. George E. Brown, Director of Compensation, to John A. Binns, November 2, 1932. Charles E. Binns pension file, National Archives, Pension Files 1861-1934.