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## **John La Mountain and the Alexandria Balloon Ascensions** by **Timothy J. Dennée**



*John La Mountain. (Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper)*

Although not the site of any significant engagements, Civil War Alexandria, Virginia was (an unwilling) host to a great many military activities, some quite out of the ordinary. Among these may be counted the ascension, at least seven times, of manned reconnaissance balloons.

Convinced of the intelligence value of having military observers aloft, President Lincoln approved the creation of a civilian Balloon Corps attached to the Army, ultimately, under

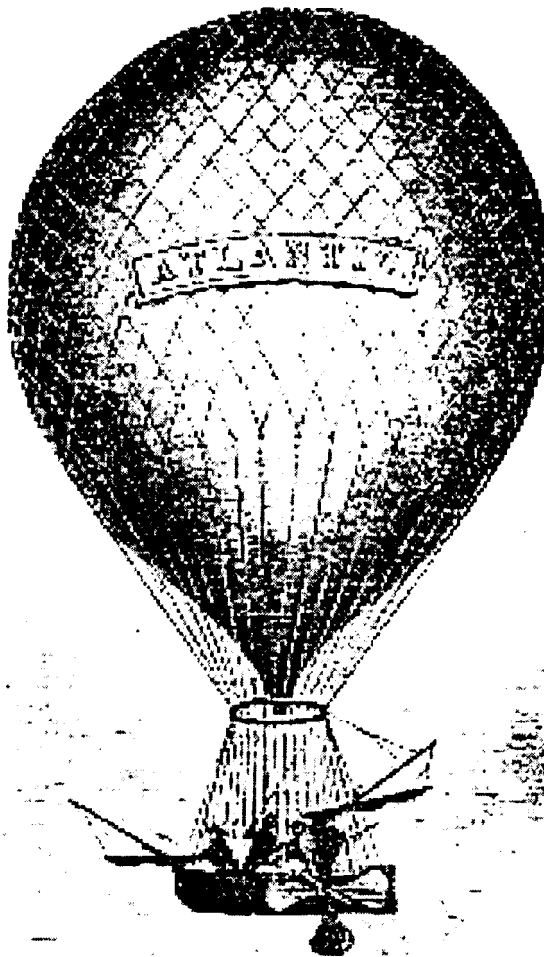
the direction of "Professor" Thaddeus Lowe, a young but experienced balloonist. In spite of many obstacles, Lowe eventually assembled a number of balloons and engaged the services of seasoned aeronauts to operate them. One of these was "daredevil" John La Mountain, a rival of Lowe's'

La Mountain, born in Wayne County, New York and a resident of Troy, was an experimenter with the new aerial technology. His prior experience as a sailor apparently gave

him a knack for meteorology. He had seriously considered crossing the Atlantic Ocean by air, and gradually marshaled enough financial backing to construct a huge balloon named for that ocean. In 1859, La Mountain, with John Wise and O.A. Gager, made the longest aerial voyage yet, a 23-hour, non-stop trip from St. Louis, which came to a bumpy end in Jefferson County, New York. Once he had made repairs to the *Atlantic*, he set out from Watertown, New York and again crash landed, this time in the Canadian wilderness 150 miles north of Ottawa.' Despite their abrupt ends, these two flights garnered the flier a certain celebrity.

Just weeks after conferences in most southern states had voted for secession, La Mountain wrote Secretary of War Cameron to offer his services. The letter was accompanied by the petition of 33 prominent citizens of Troy testifying to his ability and experience. La Mountain advocated the use of balloons for pinpointing enemy camps and troop movements and even for bombing and flying dispatches from surrounded armies or towns. According to the flier, aerial ascent was demonstrably superior to conventional methods of intelligence:

Picket skirmishing and scouting are attended with manifold hindrances, and at best give access to but a limited range of hostile country, in the very neighborhood of which a foe may be stationed without discovery. Information from spies, deserters and fugitives is frequently unreliable, and often purposely deceptive.'



*La Mountain's original Atlantic as it appeared during its New York to Canadajlight. (Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper)*

Like other adventurous balloonists of the war, La Mountain started out as a free agent, with the assent but not the imprimatur of the War Department. Major General Benjamin Butler personally hired him to operate from his base at Fortress Monroe. When La Mountain entered the government service, he possessed two balloons, the 25,000 cubic foot *Saratoga* and the *Atlantic*. The *Atlantic*, roughly half the *Saratoga's* size, was apparently named for La Mountain's original craft of that name, which had been abandoned in the Canadian swamp before the war.<sup>4</sup>

On August 1, 1861, in order to locate Confederate positions and shipping, La Mountain took off from the steamer *Fanny* in the Chesapeake Bay, making the ship the first "aircraft carrier." That month he made repeated observations of Hampton, Newport News and Norfolk, and the York and James Rivers and their tributaries. He made nighttime flights in the *Atlantic* over Rebel camps, counting campfires to estimate troop strength. Such missions encouraged the

Confederates to camouflage their artillery positions by day and order blackouts at night.’ La Mountain failed, however, to detect a Confederate advance toward Hampton Roads.<sup>6</sup>

General Butler looked very favorably on the use of aerial reconnaissance and had even considered La Mountain’s plan for a very large bomber balloon. Unfortunately for the aeronaut, Butler was replaced by John Wool, who knew nothing of his aerial operations and expenses. Wool released La Mountain and sent him to Washington for instructions.’ This presented problems for the military and the fliers.

By late 1861, Alexandria was enclosed in a ring of forts intended to protect the national capital. Thousands of troops bivouacked in the area, and sick and wounded filled structures confiscated to serve as hospitals. Particularly because of the shocking Union defeat at Manassas, however, federal troops had occupied little territory on the Virginia side of the Potomac. What better opportunity to test the capabilities of the balloons? Various balloonists proposed to spy on the enemy from the sky to help direct the invasion of the Old Dominion and to alert Washington to possible attack—or to allay the fear of such an attack among a rumor-panicked populace. While La Mountain was on the Chesapeake, Lowe had already established himself in the Washington area, conducting well-publicized experiments from the grounds of the Smithsonian experiments which had impressed President Lincoln, General McClellan and Smithsonian Secretary Joseph Henry, among others. He had also made several ascents from Arlington Heights and Ball’s Crossroads, usually after first filling his balloons at the Washington gas works and having them towed across the river.’

The military authorities were aware of the jealousies between Lowe and La Mountain. Their antipathy pre-dated the war and

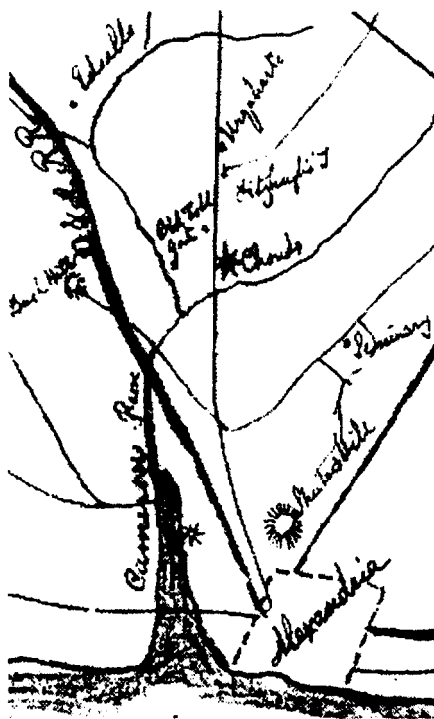
originated with La Mountain’s criticism of Lowe’s abortive attempts at trans-Atlantic flight. For his part, Lowe had disparaged La Mountain’s skills, saying that he had not “the least idea of the requirements of military ballooning.”<sup>9</sup> At Fort Corcoran on September 20, 1861, Brigadier General Fitz-John Porter, a supporter of aerial reconnaissance, interviewed Lowe and La Mountain “to ascertain the feelings of each party in relation to the contemplated employment of both in the United States service as aeronauts.” Porter unfortunately concluded that the men could work together in the same area: “I am assured by both of them that all shall work for the interests of the service.”

Mr. La Mountaine [sic] seemed to be aware that Professor Lowe had been engaged in [the Washington area] and regarded the field here as his specialty unless more than one [balloonist] was required—when there was no necessity for more than one he would retire... I think the Commanding General can rely upon the cordial co-operation of both...in working for the service.”

Porter recommended that both men and their methods and equipment be tested. Mistakenly it seems, he reported that Lowe proposed to make flights directly over the enemy, a position the pilot had backed away from, perhaps reacting his harrowing July 1861 landing beyond Union lines.” On the contrary, Lowe now favored “topical” ascensions from behind the lines, in which his balloon would remain tethered to the ground and rise to only about five hundred feet. It was La Mountain who was the fervent proponent of free flights, trusting in upper-level prevailing westerly winds to return him to Union-held territory.

At the time of the meeting with Porter, La Mountain had already secured a position with

Brigadier General William Franklin's Division at James Cloud's Triadelphia Mill, three-and-a-half miles west of Alexandria along Holmes Run and the Little River Turnpike. Shortly after the meeting, he brought up his two balloons and set up a headquarters at the mill. With him were an assistant, A. Kendrick, and a draftsman and secretary, N. F. White. Ten soldiers were detailed to help. La Mountain received from the army a wage of ten dollars a day, which, with the addition of his two assistants' pay, totaled \$525 a month. This did not include, however, the pay of the soldiers, nor the costs of gas to inflate his balloons.\*



*Detail of Confederate sketch map showing the Alexandria area. Cloud's Mill appears starred at the center near the Little River Turnpike toll gate. (The Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division)*

producing the more buoyant hydrogen gas in the field. Lowe created enough hydrogen gas to inflate a balloon by adding sulfuric acid to a ton and a half of iron filings, a process more expensive than the use of the already dear coal gas. At the war's beginning, La Mountain made the rather dubious

claim that he had a generator which could produce hydrogen from "the decomposition of water." He later admitted it would not **work**.<sup>13</sup> It is not unlikely that he had some sort of generator at Cloud's Mill, but La Mountain used the Alexandria gas works at least three times.

Each of the Balloon Corps men was at pains to prove the value of his craft and his own abilities. While there were many proponents of aerial reconnaissance in the army, there was also skepticism about the value of intelligence from civilian observers and a deep streak of technological conservatism in the military establishment. Indeed, the technology often failed-weather conditions, contrary winds, and the limitations of such fragile craft not being entirely surmountable obstacles.

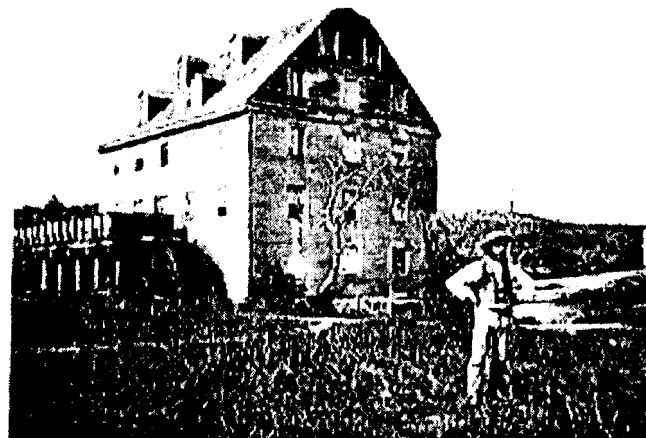
The first attempt at aerial reconnaissance from Alexandria was a complete failure. James Allen, a well-known balloonist, tried in early August to observe the Confederate forces encamped near Manassas, but the difficulty of generating hydrogen gas in the field made the aeronaut return to Alexandria to have his two balloons filled at the city's gas works on North Lee Street. As the craft were being towed back toward Falls Church, the giant bags were caught by strong winds, and the struggling escort was unable to prevent them from striking a telegraph pole and trees and **collapsing**.<sup>14</sup>

Most destructive of all, the nascent Balloon Corps was plagued by infighting. There were already hard feelings between La Mountain, Lowe, and John Wise, who had been a mentor to both. While Lowe moved along Union lines making maps and experimenting with telegraphy from the air, the newcomer La Mountain quickly forgot his assurances to General Porter, ridiculing the use of the telegraph and characterizing Lowe's flying methods as too conservative and ineffective.

Topical ascensions, with balloons attached to the earth by cords, do not allow the attainment of an altitude sufficient to

expose a considerable view. There is no other method by which a satisfactory observation of large forces, their approximate strength and positions, more especially in thoroughly patrolled and strongly fortified districts, can possibly be secured. To the eye of the aeronaut—who can, by the knowledge his art affords him of the direction and depth of different strata of the atmosphere, sail directly over points impenetrable by pickets or scouts — secrets of the most important character are clearly revealed. The country lies spread before him like a well-made map, with all its varieties of hill and valley, river and defile, distinctly defined, and with every fort, encampment, or rifle-pit within a range of many miles, manifest to observation. It would be impossible to concentrate large bodies of men, or make important defences within the limits surveyed, of which no knowledge could be procured by such a reconnaissance.<sup>15</sup>

It was time for La Mountain to prove his methods superior. His first known flight from Alexandria occurred October 4, 1861. Lowe's "topical ascensions" having become commonplace in Washington, it was natural for The *Evening Star*



*Cloud's Mill, circa 1865.*  
(U.S. Army Military History Institute)

Newspaper to misinterpret the sight of:

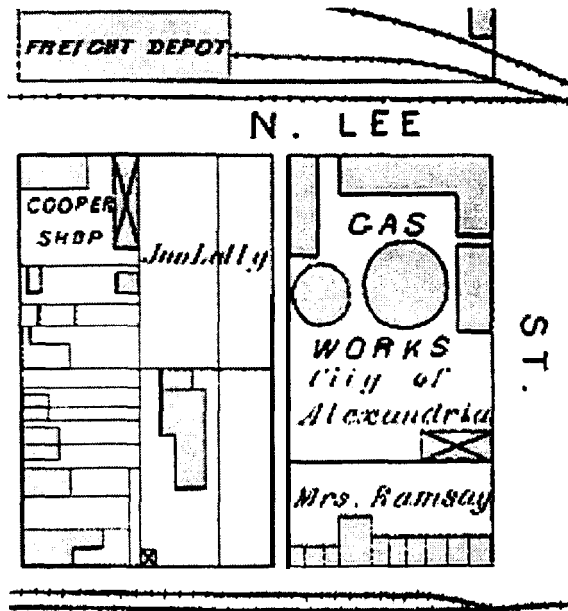
#### THE WANDERINGBALLOON

The balloon that sailed over Washington yesterday afternoon was doubtless the *Saratoga*, of Mr. La Mountain. He made an ascension in it last evening from near General Keamey's camp (in the vicinity of the Theological Seminary,) while that officer's brigade was receiving a stand of colors, on parade, President Lincoln, General McClellan and staff, and other notables being present. By some accident the balloon slipped its moorings, and was wafted over the Potomac, to descend, we hear, about six miles northeast of the city.<sup>16</sup>

It is pretty certain that the free flight was intentional. La Mountain was in the balloon and in control. The *(Alexandria) Local News* was also in error when it reported that he had flown over Confederate lines." Instead, the aeronaut flew over the capital and landed in the vicinity of Beltsville, Maryland." The flight was a flawless demonstration of his skill and of the constancy of the prevailing upper-level winds, and this was precisely the point.

But *The Evening Star's* October 5 report of the balloon "slipping its moorings" was strangely

prophetic. On October 13, La Mountain again had the *Saratoga* inflated. A mishap, blamed on a soldier detailed from Kearny's Brigade," allowed the balloon to escape its keepers, probably while being towed from the city gas works to "the camps." It drifted



*The Alexandria gas works, where La Mountain filled his balloons. (1877 G.M. Hopkins Map)*

across the river, responding only to the commands of the breeze. The *Saratoga* reportedly fell into the hands of some “Southern Rights men” in rural Maryland and was presumably destroyed.\*’ Undeterred, La Mountain had the *Atlantic* inflated the next day, and “made his first free reconnaissance over the Confederate lines near Camp Williams.”\*\*’

Still, La Mountain insisted on another demonstration. On October 18, therefore, another ascent was witnessed by a number of officers and a reluctant Thaddeus Lowe. Lowe watched as his rival rose from the gas works, “passed over a considerable portion of the city [and] was lost to view in the neighborhood of the fortresses and camps which crown the hills on the Western environs of the city.” La Mountain ably tracked Rebel movements and signaled his observations from the air.<sup>22</sup> The reconnaissance ended badly, however, as he later reported.

In descending.. near Genl. Blenkers Brigade, I was disagreeably saluted by a discharge of ball cartridges

from the men of that Brigade, cutting the net work, passing through the lower part of the Balloon in several places, and coming in unpleasant proximity to my head; upon landing I was surrounded by an infuriated crowd of officers and men, who were intent upon destroying the Balloon, myself included. Any netting was cut by their knives, they refused me the privilege of alighting, dragging me by the ropes over the rough ground to the Genl. Head Quarters, causing much danger and some damage although I showed them my passes and otherwise explained my position; the officers seemed more unreasonable than the men and paid no attention to my expostulations. It is due Genl. Blenker to say that **after** I arrived at his Quarters I was kindly received and men detailed to assist me back with my **Balloon...**<sup>23</sup>

Evidently, Blenker’s men had taken the civilian La Mountain for a Confederate spy and treated him harshly as a result. Despite the success of the reconnaissance, Lowe claimed that its conclusion had demonstrated the inadvisability of such flights.<sup>24</sup> For his part, General Blenker indignantly insisted that his men had fired no shots and that La Mountain had been “most cordially received.”<sup>25</sup>

La Mountain’s remaining balloon, the *Atlantic*, was a small craft, but it was equipped to carry two men. The balloonist received many requests from potential passengers, and invited others along as observers and to provide testimonials of the missions. A correspondent to the *Boston Journal*, identifying himself only as “Frank,” recounted his flight with La

Mountain from Alexandria in early November.

[I]n a moment...our great army lay beneath us, a sight well worth a soul to see — brown earth fortifications, white tented encampments and black lines and squares of solid soldiery in every direction. So enchanted was I with the scene, I well nigh forgot that we were drifting enemyward until Fairfax Court House lay beneath us and I had my first sight of the enemy, in the roaming squads of the rebel cavalry visible in that vicinity. Soon Centreville and Manassas came in full sight and there in their bough huts lay the great army of the South. All along they stretched out southeasterly toward the Potomac, upon whose banks their batteries were distinctly visible; so plain were they **below...that** not a regiment could escape the count.<sup>26</sup>

Similar big-city newspaper accounts are accompanied by such effusive praise of La Mountain's scientific knowledge and daring that one wonders if they were not at least partially written by the balloonist himself. It was praise that galled Lowe.

In the afternoon of December 10, 1861, La Mountain was preparing for an evening ascent. Lieutenant Colonel Colgate, of the 15th New York Infantry, "a cool and intrepid amateur," asked to accompany him on the flight. **The Atlantic** cut loose at 3:30 p.m. and with its two occupants headed northwest over enemy lines. At altitudes of sometimes

over three miles, it was possible to see as far as thirty miles. La Mountain later made this report of his observations:

Back from Occoquan a mile is a force of from four to six Regiments; on the Ox Road, about half way between Occoquan and Fairfax Station are two Reg. of Inft. and a few squads of Cavalry; at Fairfax Station the enemy is still in force... **[A]bout** half way to the R.R. fifteen hundred Infantry and two or three hundred Cavalry were drilling in an open field back of a hill.

At Fairfax Court House since my last report, there has been an increase of **three** or four Regiments with some artillery, [sic] but no large force as reported. These Regiments were drilling east of the C.H. in a field south of the road; there is also, about half way between the Court House and Vienna a Reg. of Cavalry encamped; with the exception of a very noticeable increase of Barricades and Rifle Pits for five or six miles back from Fairfax Station towards Manassas, there has been no material change in that direction, the main body being still at Manassas & Centerville....

Attaining an altitude of seventeen thousand feet I reached a current to the east, which soon took me over the Potomac when I...**rapidly** descended, landing safely, with my Balloon, north of Washington, in the encampment of 2nd R.I. Reg.; from there I reached my quarters the same **evening**.<sup>28</sup>

In all, La Mountain made at least seven ascensions **from** the vicinity of **Alexandria**.<sup>29</sup> At the time of his Alexandria flights the *Atlantic* had seen a lot of rough service, particularly during the previous summer and the experience

with Blenker's men. La Mountain requested that General Franklin furnish him the materials to construct two larger balloons. "With two balloons properly constructed...my usefulness to the Government would be increased ten-fold. I could keep one globe constantly inflated, in order to be prepared to make ascensions at all times." He proposed making them himself,

. . .as there is no person in the country who could do the work to my satisfaction, and few who can do it at all. Having tailors and excellent mechanics of other trades detailed in my service at the mill, all the necessary labor could be performed here, with great saving to Government, and without interrupting my regular operations.<sup>29</sup>

But in early 1862 a movement was under way to centralize the Balloon Corps under one man, and La Mountain's plans hinged on the outcome. He waged a campaign of words, through papers like the *New York Herald*, to see that he would be appointed superintendent. Among those whose opinion was sought was General Franklin, La Mountain's commander. Franklin made clear his indifference to the entire aerial endeavor.

I do not know Mr. Lowe, or his capacity as a balloonist. La Mountain appears to work energetically, but I doubt whether the results obtained from his employment justifies its cost. Still, since he has been in my Division he seems to have done as much, & to have done it as intelligently as any balloonist could. So, I think that under the circumstances I would quite as lief have Mr. La Mountain as any other person.<sup>30</sup>

Thaddeus Lowe had come to be treated as first among equals by the military authorities. Now, with the support of Smithsonian secretary Joseph Henry and Treasury Secretary Chase, and cordial relations with President Lincoln and Army of the Potomac commander George McClellan, Lowe possessed overwhelming political influence and was appointed Chief Aeronaut of the Union Army.<sup>31</sup> Unfortunately for Lowe, the decision further antagonized La Mountain, now formally his subordinate. In addition, the Balloon Corps was placed under the direction of the Topographical Engineers. Lowe found he was uppermost only with regard to altitude; the formerly freewheeling chief balloonist now had to answer to Lieutenant Colonel J.M. **Macomb** of the **engineers**.<sup>31</sup>

The relationship between Lowe and **Macomb** was as rocky as that between the airmen. As early as mid-February, **Macomb** accused the "Professor" of insubordination. The charge originated from La Mountain's request to obtain one of the new balloons stored by Lowe in Washington. Lowe's refusal caused La Mountain to again write General Franklin, charging that the Chief Aeronaut had been hoarding balloons so that he could buy them cheaply **from** the Army at the conclusion of the war! He complained that Lowe had kept surplus balloons out of his hands all winter "all through motives of Professional jealousy at my superior Reputation as an Aeronaut."<sup>33</sup>

La Mountain may have had a friend in **Macomb**, but the end of his own military career now appeared clearer than the Confederate camps beneath him. The flier's increasingly bitter criticism of Lowe led to his being cashiered for insubordination by General **McClellan**.<sup>32</sup>

La Mountain's discharge did not stifle his criticism, accustomed as he was to resort to attacks in the papers. But it did hurt morale



among the Corps' fiercely individualistic balloonists, many of whom undoubtedly believed they could till Lowe's shoes. Lowe was shaken by the ridicule of subordinates and the press. Charges of poor administration and even corruption were both a cause and effect of the shuffling of the Balloon Corps between the Topographical Engineers, the Signal Corps and the Quartermaster Corps. In April 1863, Captain Cyrus Cornstock, chief engineer of the Army of the Potomac, was given overall command of the aeronauts. Comstock cut Lowe's pay and fired two of his assistants — one was Lowe's father. The "Professor" resigned a month later.<sup>35</sup>

Without Lowe, the Balloon Corps gradually disintegrated. Despite having made hundreds of ascents all over the country, the unit was essentially nonexistent when the opposing armies met at Gettysburg. History treated Lowe favorably in the postwar period, rehabilitating his reputation and giving him the lion's share of credit (and biographies) for his aerial innovations and commander's position. It didn't hurt that his operations had been often photographed by Mathew Brady's men and covered by *Leslie's* magazine. Lowe's lengthy report on the Corps and his role in the war was reprinted in the Official Records of the War of the Rebellion. He also wrote a chapter on army balloons for Miller's multiple-volume Photographic History of the Civil War. La Mountain, on the other hand, died in 1870 and was largely forgotten, even in northern Virginia and New York State. Like the Balloon Corps itself, thus did the careers of its fliers see many ups and downs.<sup>36</sup>

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#### Notes

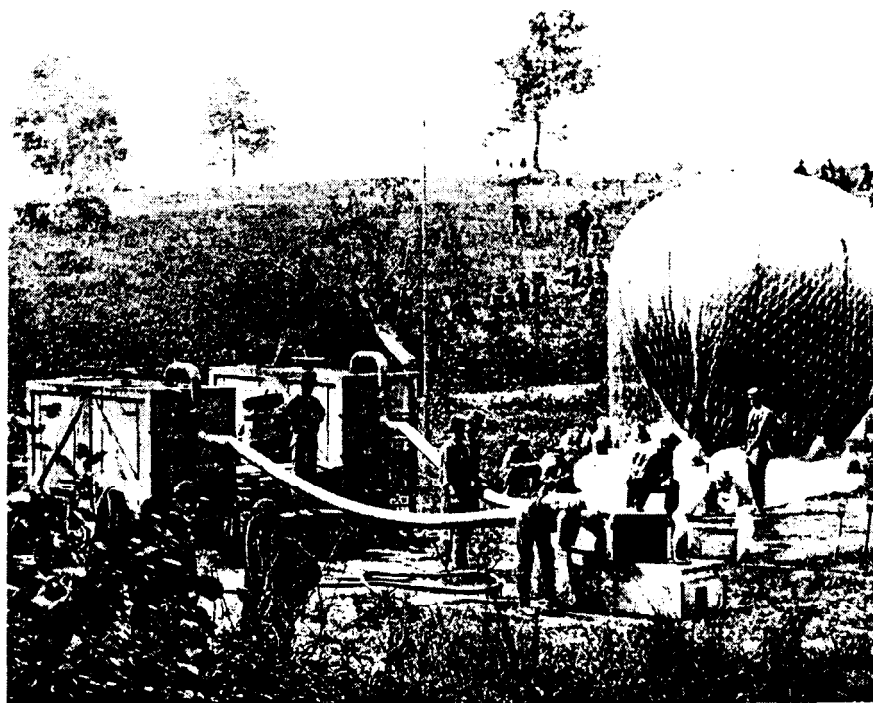
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2. Malone, Dumas, ed., Dictionary of American Biography, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1961), pp. 564-565.
  3. National Archives and Records Administration, Record Group 94, Records of the Office of the Quartermaster General, Entry 168.
  4. Ibid, Record Group 94, Entry 168; Crouch, Tom D., The Eagle Aloft: Two Centuries of the Balloon in America, (Washington, DC.: Smithsonian Institution Press), 1983, p. 343. There is apparently no evidence that La Mountain was able to salvage the original *Atlantic* from its crash site.
  5. Pindell, Richard, "Our Technological Inheritance," in *Civil War Times Illustrated*, Summer 1987, p. 49; Crouch, p. 363. The *Fanny* was later captured by Confederates after La Mountain had come to Alexandria.
  6. Crouch, p. 363.
  7. Crouch, p. 364.
  8. Brugioni, Dino A., "Arlington and Fairfax Counties: Land of Many Reconnaissance Firsts," in *Northern Virginia Heritage*, Vol. VII, No. 1, February 1985, p. 5.
  9. Crouch, pp. 349, 366.
  10. National Archives, Record Group 94, Entry 168.
  11. Block, p. 69-70.
  12. National Archives, Record Group 94, Entry 168. Crouch puts the number of the detail at forty.
  13. National Archives, Record Group 94, Entry 168; Crouch, p. 344.
  14. Crouch, pp. 350-351; The *(Washington) Evening Star*, July 15, 1861.
  15. National Archives, Record Group 94, Entry 168.
  16. *The Evening Star*, October 5, 1861.
  17. *The (Alexandria) Local News*, October 10, 1861.
  18. Crouch, p. 364; The *(Washington) National Republican*, October 7, 1861.
  19. National Archives, Record Group 94, Entry 168.
  20. *The National Republican*, October 18, 1861.
  21. Crouch, p. 364.
  22. The *Local News*, October 18, 1861; Block, p. 99; *The Evening Star*, October 19, 1861.
  23. National Archives, Record Group 94, Entry 168.
  24. Block, p. 99.
  25. National Archives, Record Group 94, Entry 168.
  26. Ibid.
  27. Ibid.
  28. *The Evening Star*, December 4, 1861; and National Archives, Record Group 94, Entry 168.
  29. National Archives, Record Group 94, Entry 168.

30. Ibid.
31. Crouch, p. 344,345.
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Timothy Dennée has been on staff at Alexandria Archaeology for seven years. He received a bachelor of arts degree in political science from **Fordham** University in 1987 and a master of arts in international affairs from the George Washington University in 1990. He also completed a master's degree in urban planning and historic preservation at the University of Maryland in 1994.



*Mathew Brady photograph of soldiers inflating one of Thaddeus Lowe's balloons.  
(The Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division)*

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