



Volume 1, Number 4

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**Fort Harrison Issue**

**Land Deal**

By now hopefully everyone knows that we have saved our first piece of battlefield land in the Richmond area. This momentous event occurred in mid-October. Each of you received a separate mailing with a map and some historical background on the property. Much of that material can be seen at our website as well.

This inaugural project demonstrates the sort of opportunity that stimulated the creation of the RBA. We aggressively identified significant land, before it even was for sale, and negotiated its purchase. Now that we have taken this satisfying step, we hope to move beyond celebration and get down to the business of paying for what we have purchased.

The RBA (like many other similar organizations) tries very hard to use as much of its treasure chest as possible on land. Producing this newsletter is the only large, predictable expense not associated with preserving battlefields. Once we retire the debt on our Fort Harrison property, we hope to move on to other projects. Anyone who has visited the area battlefields lately knows that there are more threats than solutions. Hopefully this Fort Harrison deal will be the first of many preservation victories on Richmond's Civil War battlefields.

**The Battle of Fort Harrison**

The fighting at Chaffin's Farm on September 29-30, 1864, often loses its identity in the welter of actions on the Richmond-Petersburg front from the last nine months of the war. Chaffin's Farm (pronounced Chay-fins, and often misspelled as Chapin's) was a general term for the area eight miles

Union commander Ulysses S. Grant pursued a two-front strategy that autumn. He launched simultaneous operations near both Petersburg and Richmond in July, August, September, and October. The September actions, labeled "Grant's Fifth Offensive" by historian Richard



*The cameraman stood on what now is RBA property when he took this photograph of Fort Harrison in 1865. The wall of the fort is visible on the skyline. The swale in the middle distance is our northern boundary. The photograph under the masthead (top) shows the "Great Traverse" and the southeastern face of Fort Harrison.*

south of Richmond, on the northern bank of the James River. Several lines of earthen fortifications there, mostly erected in 1862-1863, guarded the approaches to Richmond from the south. Fort Harrison stood as the largest and best known of the positions, but other sizable forts named Hoke, Johnson, Gregg, and Gilmer filled out the chain.

J. Sommers, bore greater fruit around Richmond than did any of the others.

Portions of Benjamin Butler's Army of the James crossed the river on the night of September 28-29. Men from the Tenth Corps proceeded to attack Confederate positions on

*Continued on page 3*

# "A Graphic Picture"

Excerpts from the memoir of a man who charged Fort Harrison

Lieutenant Merlin Harris of the 96th New York survived the charge across the field in front of Fort Harrison. His account, written less than 25 years later, describes his experiences in great detail. The final two paragraphs of this excerpt pertain to the ground just purchased by the RBA, with "the draw" being our joint boundary with the National Park Service:

Col. Cullen halted the 96th, as he said, for one minute to tighten belts and get a drink....During this moment's halt two cannon were fired from Fort Harrison. The first shot passed high overhead and down the road; the second struck in a large tree just at our flank and but a few feet above the ground. The crash of the second shell ended our short one-minute's halt. The sharp voice of Col. Cullen brought that string of commands that always portends a tough job close at hand, and the 96th stepped out into that fatal field with column closed in mass, arms at right-shoulder-shift, and at "common time"....As we stepped out into that open field the sight was enough to whiten the lips of the bravest. About three-fourths of a mile before us....crowning a hill in the center was a great fort, divided from front to rear by a mighty traverse 25 or 30 feet high. As far as we could then see, there did not appear a depression that would shelter a rab-

bit. The fort mounted three large black guns, two to the right and one to the left of the traverse, and about half a dozen smaller pieces.

The artillery opened at once, but for the first discharge their aim seemed to be too high. A few minutes later a second shell from one of the

large guns on the right burst a few rods in our front and low down. It was a "spherical case." It killed Color-Serg't. Sweet, and piled eight men (of those nearest the flag and all of the first division) on a piece of ground that you could almost have covered with an army blanket. But the flag was instantly lifted, the gap closed quickly, the column "steadied," and our line and step

was good enough for battalion drill.

Soon other troops got into the field and divided death's favors with us. But nevertheless it seemed as if our beautiful State flag drew an unnecessary amount of attention.

When about halfway across the field I heard in a sort of lull one of my men mutter, "about time for grape!" Hardly had the words been uttered when one of the big guns spoke, and out through the white, woolly smoke that leaped from its throat rushed a group of black balls that looked the size of our modern baseball or a trifle larger, and they didn't seem to move much faster. They struck the ground 15 or 20 rods in our front, and when

they reached the first division were from knee to waist-high. A dozen men yelled "Look out!" The men shied to the left and right, lifting their legs high in [the] air, and, to my utter astonishment, dodged them as easily as if they had been cabbageheads. But the second division had not the unobstructed view that we had, and these harmless-looking balls took off every limb they touched. Three or four later doses of these could be readily seen, but they came too fast to be dodged, and their work was terrible.

When we neared the "draw" at the foot of the hill, for a few rods only Col. Cullen ordered a double-quick....Col. Cullen's next order was to form at the brow of the hill as far up as we could and be covered, and then at his command to rise and fire at those gunners, and then to "Get into that fort as quick as God will let you!"....The enemy were waiting for us, and when we rose to fire that volley it seemed as if there opened before us the very jaws of death--yes, the mouth of hell itself!



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## Membership Renewal

In an effort to save money and still notify our members that it is time to renew, we will be putting a special sticker on the newsletter of anyone whose membership has expired, as a reminder. For those who do not renew, the newsletter with the sticker will be their last one until they bring their membership dues up to date. With the recent acquisition of land at Fort Harrison and the resulting debt, it is more important than ever to keep our membership at full strength while keeping our administrative costs as low as possible.

# The Battle of Fort Harrison

*Continued from page 1*

New Market Heights, while Eighteenth Corps troops stormed Fort Harrison and its satellite positions. The Confederates abandoned New Market Heights after a heavy fight. Farther west, blue-clad soldiers from George Stannard's 8,000-man division braved a flat and barren farm field on their way to securing Fort Harrison. When the first men reached the steep wall of the fort, they hoisted themselves up the incline the best they could. Some men jammed bayonets into the earthen walls for use as ladder rungs. A brief struggle for the top of the wall ended in Confederate defeat, and Stannard's triumphant survivors streamed into their hard-won trophy.

The Confederate defenders, generally under the control of one-legged veteran Richard S. Ewell, had found that they had too few men for the amount of line they were protecting. The loss of Fort Harrison allowed Ewell and his subordinates to contract and concentrate their forces at the same time their Union counterparts found themselves more widely dispersed. While Eighteenth Corps commander General E. O. C. Ord attempted to capitalize on the momentum of the Fort Harrison victory, the Confederates clustered around cannon in their four remaining forts: Hoke, Johnson, Gregg, and Gilmer.

Ord's efforts proved unsuccessful. Although his men attacked each of the remaining forts, every assault featured poor management and piecemeal deployment. Ord himself fell wounded near Fort Hoke, south of Fort Harrison. Direct assaults against the mutually supporting forts Johnson, Gregg, and Gilmer all ended in decisive Union defeat.

The following day R. E. Lee himself gathered together reinforcements in an effort to reclaim Fort Harrison from its captors. Stannard's men had worked steadily during the night to enclose the open northern end of the fort, which faced Richmond and the



*An 1865 photograph said to show the exterior of Fort Harrison.*

Confederates. Although the wall they built was only a few feet high, it helped protect the Unionists from Lee's counterattack. That attack, in fact, was not very menacing. Different brigades attacked at different times, mostly from the north. Each formation dissolved under withering fire, with heavy loss. Fort Harrison (soon to be renamed Fort Burnham in honor of an Eighteenth Corps brigade commander killed in the fighting) remained in Federal hands.

In the long run the fighting at Chaffin's Bluff became an important ingredient in the eventual success of the Union armies in Virginia. Troops from the Army of the James occupied Fort Harrison/Burnham for the remainder of the war, and even extended their lines in each direction for several miles. Their continued presence forced the Confederate authorities to retain high quality troops in the earthworks in front of Richmond, further reducing Lee's manpower and offensive options on the Petersburg front. On a more human level, the battles at Chaffin's Bluff produced combined casualties of close to 5,000 over the two days of fighting. Of that number approximately 3,300 were Union and 1,700 were Confederate.

On Richmond's  
FRONT LINE

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## Odds & Ends About Fort Harrison

• Fort Harrison only came into the national spotlight in September 1864, but Confederate authorities knew the area well before that. Engineers laid out the fort in an area generally called Chaffin's Farm, which took its name from Susan Chaffin, a very wealthy widow. The 1860 census showed that the 45-year-old Mrs. Chaffin enjoyed a net worth of \$65,000--a tremendous amount of money in that era. She reportedly owned thousands of acres and dozens of slaves. The war not only ended her prosperity, it completely ruined her farm and the sur-

rounding countryside. An unsympathetic Union chaplain found Mrs. Chaffin in April 1865, begging "for a cast away mule" with which to plow.

• Many different units camped and worked on Chaffin's Farm before 1864. The Virginians of General Henry A. Wise's brigade surely were the best known. Wise's men spent more than a year on the farm, building fortifications and protecting the James River approaches to Richmond. At one point, "having nothing for the troops of his command to do," General Wise personal-

ly distributed seeds to his men and encouraged the soldiers to create and maintain gardens. This earned the men of his command the derisive nickname of "Wise's Gardeners," a taunt they finally silenced in June and July 1864 in the bloody battles around Petersburg.

• Although Fort Harrison stood not far from Harrison's Landing on the James River, the earthen strongpoint was named not for the presidential family, but instead for Lieutenant William Ellzey Harrison, an engineer who helped design the fort.

**YES!** I WANT TO HELP PRESERVE OUR NATION'S HERITAGE, PLEASE SIGN ME UP.

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