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White House Landing

Malcolm Harris, in his excellent two-volume history of New Kent County, Virginia, asserts that "there have been few plantations in Virginia or America that have been so intimately related to the history of the United States as the White House Plantation on the Pamunkey River."

The site has been prominent for two and a half centuries, but readers of this newsletter will find greater interest in the property's extensive connection with the Civil War. Much of White House's importance during the war stemmed from the adjacent Richmond and York River Railroad. That line only opened in the late 1850's. Its availability as a

line of supply lured George McClellan's enormous army in 1862. The railroad ran westward from the village of West Point, which sits on the point of land at the confluence of the York and Pamunkey Rivers. The tracks crossed the Pamunkey on a trestle bridge at White House and continued westward to Richmond.

Station, Savage's Station, and Fair Oaks Station.

Because the Pamunkey River could accommodate ocean-going traffic at least as far upriver as White House railroad bridge, that site offered all the necessary ingredients to keep McClellan's complicated and demanding supply system in operation.

Historians estimate that the Army of the Potomac needed a daily minimum of 700 tons of materiel to stay effective at the front. The combination of shipping and railroad at White House Landing allowed the army's staff officers to meet that demand on most days.

The supply base operated for six weeks in 1862, until the Confederates

threatened the railroad between McClellan's army and White House. As part of his much mooted "change of base," McClellan abandoned the supply depot at White House and moved his operation to the James. In the process, his men destroyed millions of dollars worth of supplies



The White House became the most popular tourist destination in Virginia in 1862. This photograph was taken just days before soldiers burned the house.

BREAKING NEWS

As this issue went to press the RBA was on the verge of being able to make at least one, and possibly several, significant preservation announcements. Stand by for the exciting details.

Various stops, depots, and watering spots along the route became famous in 1862. Some of the prominent ones west of White House included Tunstall's Station, Dispatch Station, Orchard

**ANNUAL MEETING
DETAILS INSIDE,
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and burned the house. Confederate cavalry led by J. E. B. Stuart arrived on June 29, 1862, to find the smoldering residue. A brief fight between a piece of Confederate horse artillery and a Union gunboat enlivened the scene.

During the course of the next two years, periodic Union raiding forces visited White House. So did Confederate patrols. At one point in 1863 a detachment of Virginians from Henry A. Wise's brigade occupied the area while on fishing detail, casting their seines in the Pamunkey with favorable results.

The return of the Army of the Potomac to eastern Virginia in 1864 meant renewed service for White House as a Union supply base. Ulysses Grant shifted his operation there late in May. For two weeks nearly all Union provisions, ammunition, and reinforcements funneled through White House Landing on their way west toward Cold Harbor. An equally immense stream of casualties took the reciprocal course, usually riding eastward in ambulances to the waiting hospital boats at White House. When Grant moved toward Petersburg in mid-June, he shifted his logistical lifeline from White House Landing to City Point.

Although the main armies did not see White House again during the war, the site's connection with military operations did not end with the departure of Grant's army. Philip Sheridan's blue-clad cavalry visited the place twice in the final 10 months of the war. On June 21, 1864, his column of

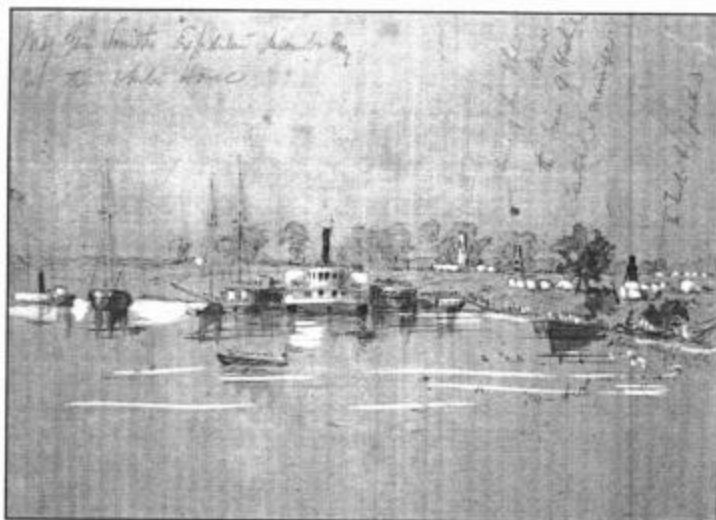
horsemen crossed from east to west on the hastily rebuilt railroad bridge. His command loitered at White House for several days with its back to the river. Confederate cavalry under General Wade Hampton found Sheridan there. A brisk fight ensued, with Confederate artillery lobbing shells into the vicinity of the landing and Sheridan extending his perimeter westward toward Tunstall's Station to avoid being pinned against the river. The contending sides eventually sidled southward and fought the

alike was a sincere reverence for George Washington. Virtually everyone who passed through White House Landing between 1862 and 1865 understood the connection between the place and the "Father of the Country." Martha Dandridge Custis, a young widow, owned the property when Washington met her on the banks of the Pamunkey in 1758. After a fairly brief courtship, George and Martha wed on January 6, 1759. (Next winter will be the 250th anniversary of that famous marriage). Opinion is

divided as to whether the ceremony occurred at Martha's home--the White House--or in nearby St. Peter's Episcopal Church. There is good evidence for both sides of that argument.

George Washington assumed control of affairs at White House, and although the couple lived elsewhere, the plantation became one of his most significant

pieces of property. It passed through various heirs, eventually reaching William Henry Fitzhugh Lee ("Rooney"), the second son of Robert E. Lee and his wife Mary Custis Lee. Young Lee lived there before and after the war. It was his plantation that suffered extensively from the presence of the Union army in 1862, 1864, and 1865. His mother, Mrs. R. E. Lee, lived there for a time in 1862, only leaving just hours before McClellan's men arrived in May. She left behind a sassy note addressed to the invaders, warning them not to despoil a place so closely connected to George Washington. She signed it "A



The 18th Corps disembarked beside the ruins of the White House in May 1864. Two days later it fought at Cold Harbor.

Battle of Samaria Church on the 24th, in Charles City County.

Sheridan's raiders reached White House Landing one more time. In March 1865, after roaming through central Virginia and targeting railroads, canals, and other elements of Virginia's transportation and supply infrastructure, the Union cavalry arrived at the historic White House property. They found the railroad bridge destroyed (yet again) and had to await the arrival of a ship loaded with planking in order to rebuild the bridge and cross the river.

The House

One of the few pieces of common ground shared by Confederate and Union soldiers

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Unique Spot for Annual Meeting

This year's RBA annual meeting will occur on Saturday, June 14. The place, while technically not a battlefield, is a famous Civil War locale of great interest. It is White House and White House

the nearby landing.

The day's events will begin, rain or shine, at 10.00 a.m. and will conclude by 2.00 p.m., if not before. There will be several speakers on hand to address dif-

ferent aspects of the site's history. This also will be the occasion of the customary RBA business meeting. Please monitor the RBA's newly remodeled website for particulars on some of the day's

events. Everything is free and open to everyone; feel welcome to invite any non-member friends who might be interested. Bring a lawn chair and a picnic lunch, and chew your lunch while you chew the fat with our speakers, RBA members, and fellow Civil War enthusiasts at the river. We have established a link on the website where anyone who expects to attend should RSVP. This is for planning purposes only, to help RBA volunteers be adequately

prepared for the day's events. Please take a moment to RSVP at the website.

21st Century Website!

After falling dormant for several years, the RBA's website has received an updated and improved look. Visitors to the site (www.saverichmondbattlefields.org) will find a greater range of reading material, background information, and preservation news. The improved site remains "under construction." Bookmark it and keep an eye on it for breaking news that might occur in the gaps between issues of the newsletter.



McClellan at White House

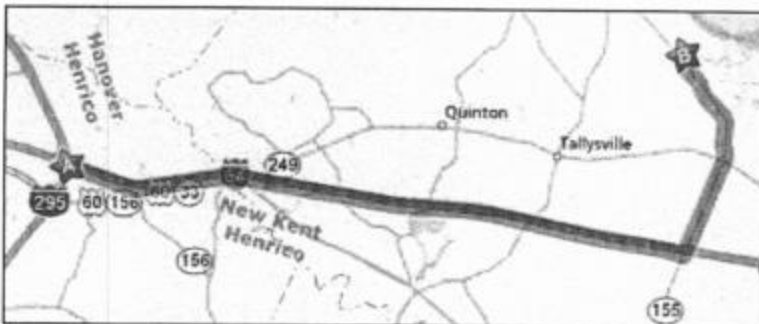
Landing, on the banks of the Pamunkey River east of Richmond. This immensely historical spot is not routinely accessible to the public, and it is rare indeed for groups to visit. White House's connection with George Washington, the Lees, and numerous military campaigns combine to make this one of the most important historical sites in all of Virginia. See the accompanying article in this newsletter for background on White House and

On Richmond's FRONT LINE

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Directions From Richmond

- 1: Start out going EAST on I-64 E. 13.5 mi.
- 2: Take the VA-155 exit, EXIT 214, toward NEW KENT. 0.3 mi
- 3: Turn LEFT onto VA-155/ N COURTHOUSE RD. 2.2 mi
- 4: VA-155/ N COURTHOUSE RD becomes OLD RIVER RD. 2.6 mi
- 5: Turn RIGHT onto ROCKAHOCK BAR RD (Portions unpaved). 0.1 mi

White House cont...

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grand-daughter of Mrs. Washington."

The original house, where George and Martha Washington might have been married, disappeared sometime in the first part of the 19th century. The owners built a replacement White House in about 1827. It was that second White House that New York soldiers burned on June 28, 1862, during the evacuation of the Union supply base. Soon after the war Rooney Lee brought his second wife to his old plantation and built a third version of the structure on the site. It also

burned, in 1892. Today an original spring house remains beside the river, not far from the brick foundation of the White Houses, which probably incorporate the remains of the 1827 and 1867 houses.

An Eyewitness Description

Joel Cook traveled with the Union army in 1862 and wrote a series of letters to a Philadelphia newspaper. His description of the White House gives valuable details on the configuration and appearance of the building: "The second house, far from being a *white* one, was painted a sort of pink color....The house was plainly built, in the form of a centre

building and wings, its entire front being about forty feet and its depth twenty. It was two stories high, with a peaked roof, and porches ornamented the main building. Inside there were main halls, and a staircase occupying the centre, and a room on each floor in each wing. Two attics were under the roof. The whole structure was of frame....The grounds around the house were simply a grass-field, in which grew several large trees....The house was fifty yards back of the river, and the negro-huts and garden were on the bank of the stream below."

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