

On Richmond's FRONT LINE

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West Point During The War

During the Civil War the little village of West Point, Virginia, had greater significance than its size might suggest.

West Point is in King William County, 35 miles due east of downtown Richmond. Located at the tip of a peninsula where the Mattaponi and Pamunkey rivers come together to become the York, the town offered any occupying military force the opportunity to interdict naval traffic on those waterways. The presence of the Richmond and York River Railroad made West Point even more interesting. That

railroad ran east from the Confederate capital city, across the Chickahominy River, over the

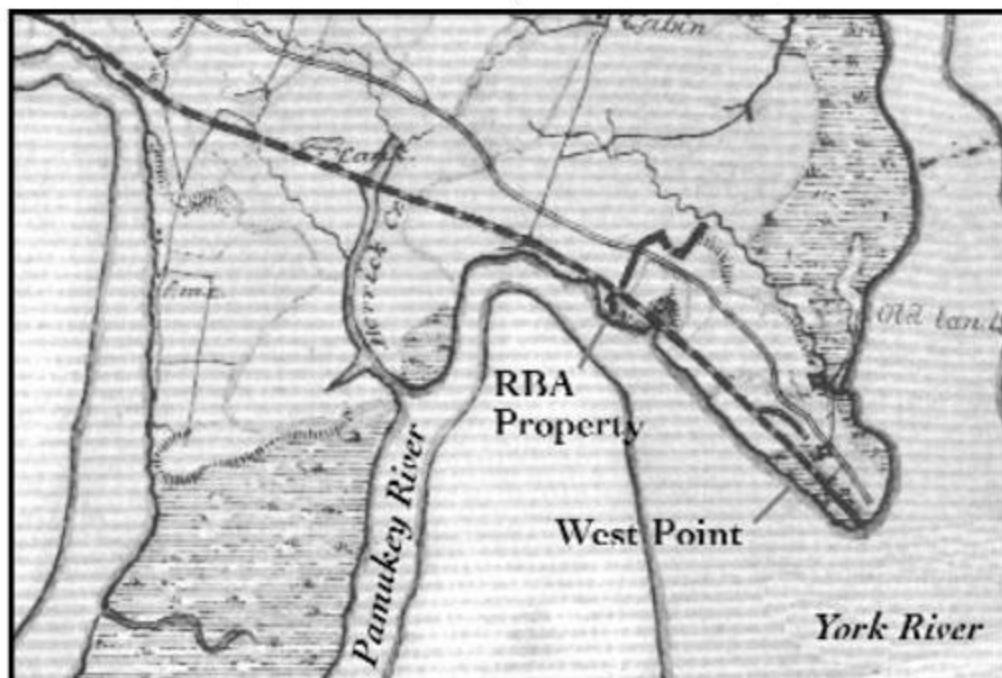
tracks from White House to West Point in 1861; the start of the Civil War must have prevented the

completion of that segment of the railroad. But the line had been graded and was about ready for use.

When George McClellan wheeled his army into position east of Richmond in May 1862, he had the option of using West Point as his primary point of connection between the navy, his supply

ships, the railroad, and his army. But once he determined that White House Landing could handle the logistics load, he elected to establish his base there and save about ten miles. Nonetheless the wharves at West Point offered a comforting backstop, ready for employment should White House falter.

Many histories take notice of the Battle of West Point, which is an alternate and inaccurate name for the Battle of Brickhouse Point, or Eltham's Landing (May 7, 1862). Some future issue of "On Richmond's Front Lines" will address that battle, which occurred just inland from the



This wartime map shows the Union-built entrenchments at West Point. The RBA section is between the railroad and the river.

Pamunkey River at White House Landing, and then down a modest peninsula to its terminus at West Point. Apparently there were no

West Point Fort Preserved!

After more than a year of labor, the RBA finally has taken title to a small piece of land at West Point. Unfortunately the property is only one-half of an acre, on a bluff above the Pamunkey River. The site is attractive (and worth preserving) because of the remnants of a Union fort constructed there in 1863. We now control most of the fort, including a well-defined artillery position. See the accompanying article and map for historical background.

A friendly and far-sighted landowner donated this ground to the RBA. Although the purchase price was free, acquiring land even through donation is costly. In this case, we incurred considerable expense through surveying, title work, and all of the accumulated small charges that accompany the acquisition of any property.

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York River, southwest of West Point.

Although the area had been settled for centuries, the town of West Point only dates from the 1850's, its history inextricably connected to the advent of the railroad. A Vermont soldier who sailed past it in 1862 wrote of it as "a village of about twenty houses." The Confederates had been operating some sort of a hospital there in the spring of 1862--the particulars of which are unknown--but were forced to abandon everything there in the first part of May when the Army of the Potomac arrived.

The following year West Point again reached prominence as Union forces came up the peninsula to threaten Richmond from the east while the primary armies toiled elsewhere. A preliminary skirmish occurred on April 16, 1863, when a pair of companies from the 46th Virginia Infantry (of General Henry A. Wise's brigade) grappled with two Union gunboats patrolling in the vicinity. The Virginians evened the odds by using two Blakely cannon. The encounter probably excited the participants and the locals, but it produced no measurable results.

Only three weeks later, on May 7, 1863, West Point saw a

more substantial episode. Thousands of Union soldiers disembarked from transports and occupied the village. The men belonged to the command of General John A. Dix and his instructions called for the destruction of crops and supplies in that part of Virginia. This occurred at one of the busiest times of the war in Virginia. Stoneman's recent cavalry raid north of Richmond waned, the numbing battle at Chancellorsville had just ended, and James Longstreet's men threatened Suffolk off to the south.

Immediately after landing, and

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Preservation Tales

The RBA has two or three very steady supporters in the northernmost part of North America. One of them, known only half-jokingly at RBA headquarters as "the leading Civil War preservationist in Canada," recently wrote in asking for "more about how you locate the properties i.e. how you put together these historic sites with the property coming on the market, the negotiations etc. I'd appreciate a short article in the newsletter."

There are hundreds of properties on the battlefields around Richmond. The RBA usually looks for places that have a certain formula. The land needs to be significant, of course, and it should retain enough integrity to be worth preserving. Places like Gettysburg, Shiloh, and Chickamauga own most of their key ground already and can focus on filling in little gaps, no matter the circumstances. But around Richmond there is so much unpreserved that allocating precious resources on marginal properties seems unwise.

Another mandatory factor with potential RBA preservation projects is the size of the property. We do our best to cultivate positive relationships with any friendly landowner, but in truth some

parcels are simply too large for this organization to buy. A consistently friendly coordination between the RBA and the Civil War Preservation Trust helps ensure that if the RBA finds any promising multi-million dollar opportunities, the CWPT usually will be ready to step in.

Every successful preservation project in our history has been substantially different than the others. Back in the earliest part of the decade, the RBA identified medium-sized tracts of battlefield land that were important, but did not yet have any houses on them. We then sent out exploratory letters to the owners, explaining what the RBA was. This was done at all of the area battlefields. One of the landowners responded by calling in for more information. A few months later, we had purchased her property at Fort Harrison, right in the attack path of the Union 18th Corps.

The ground preserved at Cold Harbor last year is an altogether different story. A local resident and friend of the organization drove past the property and saw a "for sale" sign. He called in immediately, and within 48 hours the RBA's board of directors were on the ground with the realtor.

Another 48 hours later and the property was ours. The seller had received a letter from the RBA years before but was not responsive at that time. Circumstances changed, the land went on the market, and only a vigilant neighbor enabled us to protect that important ground. This illustrates one of the strengths of having local preservation groups "on the ground."

At Fussell's Mill, we proactively contacted two of the co-owners several years ago, using a mutual friend as a point of introduction. In an amazing stroke of good luck, it turned out that another of the co-owners not only worked in the same office building as the RBA's treasurer, but already was on good terms with him. Even so, things moved slowly. It was at least two full years from our first visit at the site until all of the co-owners agreed to the sale of the battlefield to the RBA.

For every story like these three, there are ten or fifteen false alarms and failures. No two episodes are the same. The RBA continues to pursue battlefield land that has the requisite combination of significance, integrity, and affordability. Hopefully, the next preservation success is just around the corner.

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before executing the details of their orders, the Union soldiers began erecting fortifications in and around West Point to protect themselves from any Confederate interference. The balance of the line ran on an east-west axis, across the narrow peninsula between the two rivers, and was studded with six artillery emplacements. It is a tiny piece of that line, now 146 years old, that has just been preserved by the RBA. Each of the battery positions had a name; it is thought that the one now owned by the RBA is either the remains of "Battery

McClellan" or "Battery Lincoln."

Abundant railroad ties lay near at hand and Union soldiers used them to brace up the earthen breastworks and to build platforms upon which to mount cannon. The soldiers cleared trees in front to improve fields of fire, tore down inconvenient buildings, built abatis, magazines and bombproofs, and otherwise took all precautions against a Confederate attack that never materialized. They created an unusually strong position. "We have done a vast amount of labor," wrote a 144th New York Infantry man. "Have built 4 forts & some[thing] over a mile of rifle

pits of the heaviest kind being 4 feet thick on top 10 & 12 on the bottom & as high as a man's head." In between shoveling dirt, the enlisted men dodged the "great big bouncing black snakes here."

The working soldiers also recognized their proximity to sites made famous by the previous spring's campaign. As one New Yorker wrote on May 8, "we are now following in McClellan's old tracks...I hope that we will meet with better success than he did."

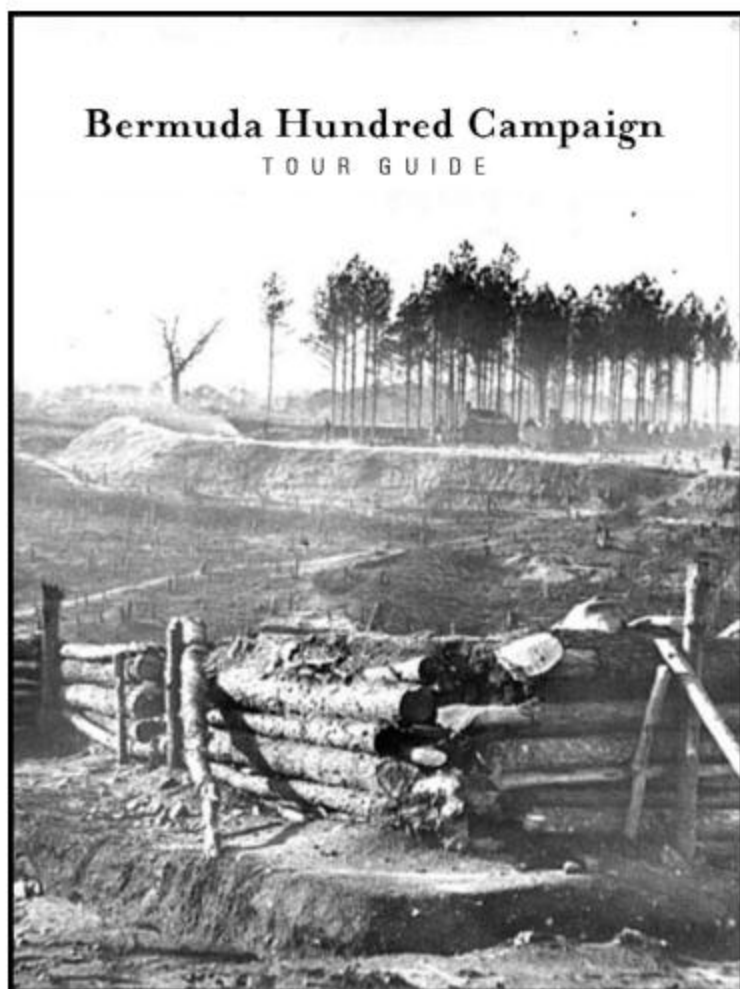
Soon after completing the intense labor of building a defensible line, the Union soldiers packed up and sailed away, apparently without having fired a shot at any Confederate force. R. E. Lee's army operated in Pennsylvania then, and Federal planners saw little value in having a force as small as Dix's loitering so far from any decisive theater of operations. By July 8 the last of the bluecoats had departed West Point, leaving behind a truly formidable set of fortifications.

Excellent New Book On Local Battlefields

The Chesterfield County Historical Society has produced a driving tour guide to the Bermuda Hundred Campaign. The tour consists of 26 sites in Chesterfield County, Colonial Heights and Hopewell, associated with that 1864 campaign. The book con-

tains 58 pages with photographs and narratives for each site. It also includes maps of troop movements overlaid with the present day road system to help visitors visualize the flow of battles over the modern landscape. Complete driving directions for each site are included,

along with GPS coordinates. The cost of the book is just \$12. Proceeds from the sales will be used to fund trails and new interpretive signs for the county's several Civil War parks. The book is available from the Chesterfield County Historical Society, P. O. Box 40, Chesterfield, Virginia 23832, or at 804-796-7121.



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Medal of Honor at Fussell's Mill

The RBA's recent acquisition of nearly 30 acres at the Fussell's Mill battlefield came with many bonus features. In addition to being core battlefield area, and having an historic house, an historic road trace, entrenchments, and the ruins of the original mill, the ground also has many compelling human interest connections.

One of those tales involves a Medal of Honor. Sergeant Alonzo Pickle, of the 1st Minnesota Infantry Battalion, received the medal long after the war (in 1895) for special gallantry.

The famous 1st Minnesota Infantry bore little resemblance in August 1864 to the regiment that fought in the West Woods at Sharpsburg and in the thick of the action at Gettysburg. Reduced to just a battalion, the remnant of the regiment charged across the mill-dam at Fussell's Mill on August 14 during the advance of Barlow's division. Pickle, who was barely 21 years old, rescued a comrade in dramatic fashion. The citation for his Medal of Honor says: "At the risk of his life, voluntarily went to the assistance of a wounded officer lying close to the enemy's lines

and, under fire, carried him to a place of safety." We believe that entire episode occurred on ground now preserved by the RBA.

Pickle's birth--July 2, 1843, at Dunham, Canada--means that he celebrated his 20th birthday in combat on the battlefield at Gettysburg. He survived for a full 60 years after his heroics at Fussell's Mill, dying May 24, 1925. He is buried at Sleepy Eye Cemetery in Brown County, Minnesota, which is about 90 miles southwest of Minneapolis.

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

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