

## A History of Fort Magruder Williamsburg, Virginia 1861 to Current

Presented on the occasion of the U.D.C. May 2, 2021, Memorial Day Celebration

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On April 23, 1861, Benjamin Stoddert Ewell offered his services to the Confederacy. He was appointed to the rank of Lt. Colonel and given two initial assignments: 1) raise and begin training 10 infantry companies in Williamsburg & 2) survey a line for defense across the peninsula at Williamsburg.

He initially recruited just over 30 men to form the Williamsburg Junior Guard. More would follow. Also, additional companies were raised on the lower peninsula and sent to Williamsburg to train with the 'Junior Guard.' Camp Page was set up in the area of the current Capitol Landing Road and training began. These local peninsula companies would become the 32<sup>nd</sup> Virginia Infantry. **A1 see additional info in footnotes.**

Ewell laid out a proposed line of fortifications stretching from Tutter's Neck Pond to Queen's Creek. General Lee approved this concept and then sent Captain Alfred L. Rives to review the plan. Rives specialized in defensive lines and fortifications whereas Ewell had only had engineering classes and theory at West Point and did not have practical experience. The key feature of the Rives changes involved moving Fort Magruder (redoubt 6) forward much closer to the intersection of the Yorktown Road and the Lee's Mill – Hampton Road. (Redoubts 5 and 7 had their positions adjusted to provide a supporting field of artillery fire for Ft. Magruder.) Colonel Magruder and Gen. Lee both approved the final adjustments which included Fort Magruder and 13 other redoubts connected by rifle pits and crossing fields of artillery fire.

In late May, 1861, construction began. The men of the 32<sup>nd</sup> Virginia Infantry, conscripted slaves, and men from many other CSA Infantry regiments would provide the manpower for construction. Camp Page grew larger. Regiments of Gen. Lafayette McLaws Division would spend many months here working on the defenses before being sent down the peninsula to serve with Gen. Magruder manning the Warwick Line. Of his 13 infantry regiments the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup> & 10<sup>th</sup> Louisiana, the 10<sup>th</sup> Georgia and the 15<sup>th</sup> and 32<sup>nd</sup> Virginia would spend the most time in Williamsburg. The 32<sup>nd</sup> Virginia would stay in Williamsburg from recruitment in May of 1861 until the battle in May of 1862.

From June of 61 through April of 62 it was a constant struggle for manpower and supplies. Requests constantly went to Richmond, including to the Secretary of War, requesting up to 1500 slaves from the Richmond area in addition to horses, wagons, axes, spades etc. Manpower, other than soldiers, was not forthcoming. 1

Disease ran rampant among the soldiers in Williamsburg. The mosquito ruled the land and typhoid fever, diphtheria, dysentery, mumps, measles, smallpox, and all types of camp fever decimated the ranks. The Williamsburg hospitals were full of sick soldiers. On July 21<sup>st</sup> Gen. McLaws visited the General Hospital and wrote his wife that, "*there are about one hundred patients with measles, mumps, and all kinds of diseases as soldiers have. . . . it is a sickly country.*" 2

The majority of the sick were cared for in four area hospitals: 1) *The College Hospital* which was located in the Wren building, 2) *The Female Academy Hospital* which was located near the site of the Colonial Capitol, 3) *The Episcopal Hospital* which was located at Bruton Parish, and *The African Church Hospital* which was at the African Baptist Church across the street from the Lunatic Asylum. Dr. Galt's sister was the patron saint of the *African Church Hospital*. The vast majority of sick were cared for at the *College Hospital* and the *Female Academy Hospital*. When General McLaws wrote his wife about visiting his sick at the 'General Hospital' he is no doubt referring to the *Female Academy Hospital*. 3

Later in the summer, in another letter to his wife, he stated that he was supervising the construction of dams, obstructions and earthworks. He noted he was, *“off to put a work party to work cutting down fruit trees that obstructed the field of fire of a battery and entangling a ravine that led up in front of another battery.”*

Regarding the work on Fort Magruder he mentioned, *“the main work here is fast approaching completion and on the right and left redoubts [#5 & #7] of formidable strength are already finished or will be within a week.”* <sup>4</sup>

The men dying of disease at the area hospitals are recorded in the Bucktrout Order Book. Some were shipped home but most are buried in the Bucktrout plot at Cedar Grove Cemetery and they are laid out in rows by state. A large memorial erected by the U. D. C. marks the area. A significant number of these burials are from the various regiments commanded by Gen. McLaws.

<u>Regiment</u>	<u>July – Dec., 1861</u>	<u>Jan. – Mar, 1862</u>
2 Louisiana	22	2
5 Louisiana	7	2
10 Louisiana	1	4
10 Georgia	31	10
15 Virginia	3	3
32 Virginia **	2	

The 32<sup>nd</sup> Virginia was the ‘local’ regiment, spent the entire time here, but had built up immunity to local contagions. The 10<sup>th</sup> Georgia and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Louisiana, in particular, did not fare well. Many other regiments spent a limited time in Williamsburg and in particular the 14<sup>th</sup> Virginia (Armistead) with 15 dead, the 13<sup>th</sup> Alabama (Colquitt) with 11 dead, and the 5<sup>th</sup> North Carolina (Garland) with 5 dead fared poorly in the area. <sup>5</sup>

(Additionally, the 7, 8, 11 & 16 Georgia, Cobb’s Legion, 17 Mississippi, & 15 North Carolina Infantry plus the Peninsula Artillery, Troup Artillery, Cabell’s 1<sup>st</sup> Virginia Artillery, Magruder Lt. Artillery, 1<sup>st</sup> Co. Richmond Howitzers & 1<sup>st</sup> & 2<sup>nd</sup> Co. Washington Artillery were all in McLaws Division) <sup>6</sup>

By late March of 1862, the 32<sup>nd</sup> Virginia Infantry was manning Fort Magruder and forwarding all troops from General Johnston's army down the peninsula to the Warwick line. General Joseph Johnston arrived on the peninsula the second week of April to take personal command. The CSA troops abandoned the Warwick line on May 3 and withdrew toward Richmond. McLaws division joined the 32<sup>nd</sup> Virginia in Fort Magruder and Redoubt 7 holding off Union troops arriving on the afternoon of May 4. As action heated up on May 5 several divisions under Longstreet were recalled to Williamsburg to stem the Union pursuit and the battle raged till nightfall. When Longstreet's troops arrived the men of McLaws division, including the 32<sup>nd</sup> Virginia, began their withdrawal toward Richmond.

At nightfall on the 5<sup>th</sup> the 11<sup>th</sup> Virginia Infantry was withdrawn from the 'Ravine' and sent to Fort Magruder. Here are the words of Private Newton Camper of Company D – The Fincastle Rifles, *"In the night . . . Co. D was relieved and sent to Fort Magruder, a short distance in the rear. Here the men spent a miserable night. Having left their baggage in Williamsburg on the morning of the battle, the men were without blankets or protection of any kind from the weather. More than this, they had no fires, and were standing in mud and water, in many places over their shoetops . . ."* 7

The correspondent of the *New York Daily Times* traveling with McClellan's army filed the following description from Williamsburg dated May the 7<sup>th</sup>, *"The second line of Rebel defenses above Yorktown consisted of 13 formidable earth forts, within sure artillery range of each other. One of them, Fort Magruder, was of great strength. Fort Magruder and most of the key forts were in front of General Heintzelman and on his left."* This of course was the main area of battle including the 'Ravine' and the area from the 'Ravine' to the major road intersection in front of Fort Magruder.

Our un-named correspondent also noted the *"abandoned wounded in forts, in cornfields, in churches, in court houses, record offices, colleges, and hospitals. . . . What of the abandoned dead? They strewed the woods, they were in the fields,*

*along the fence lines, on the edge of timbered portions and near the forts. Burial parties worked all day Tuesday (6<sup>th</sup>) and the labor begins again this morning.”* <sup>8</sup>

In a May 17 letter the sister of Sgt. Robert W. Johnson, Co. H – 8<sup>th</sup> New Jersey Infantry asked him if bodies could be returned home for burial. He replied on May 21<sup>st</sup>, *“It will be an utter impossibility to procu[re] those bodies I think for they are decayed a great deal by this time, and then they where not buried in cofins for we could not get them. Even the Officers where buried the same as the men no distinction in death.”* <sup>9</sup> They were buried by burial details in groups, wooden identification markers provided for many, simply wrapped in blankets in shallow graves. In 1864 and 1865 the Federal government began exhuming the bodies and relocating to the National Cemetery in Yorktown. Many of the markers did not survive and those soldiers became ‘unknowns.’ <sup>10</sup>

Attached is artwork, from the Williamsburg Battlefield Association website, by Union soldier Robert Knox Sneden with his depiction of Fort Magruder following the battle. The Southwest Bastion of the fort is all that remains and it matches up very well with his drawing. Also shown, by Robert, is the location where 300 Union soldiers have been buried by the burial details. Some of his other artwork of the battlefield shows other burial locations.

Following the battle, Williamsburg became a Union occupied city and Fort Magruder became a Union fort and served as the headquarters for the area. There were a variety of raids on the town by Confederate forces in 1863 and 1864. This maintained a level of tension in the area. Union troops passing through and training in the area would camp near Fort Magruder. A few new redoubts were constructed facing up the peninsula. The following order was issued on June 14, 1864.

Headquarters U S Forces  
Fort Magruder Va June 14<sup>th</sup> 1864

## General Orders

### No 11

The galloping or fast driving of all public animals unless directed is strictly prohibitive. Order to go beyond an ordinary pace must be in writing.

By Command of Col W. H. P. Steere

E, V, Brown.

Capt & AAAG

11

From January, 1864, through the end of May, 1864, there were United States Colored Troops in the area. The 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> USCTs are documented as being on the lower peninsula, camping or transiting through Williamsburg and making patrols and forays to New Kent and King & Queen County. These troops were all assigned to the Army of the James and most departed in May to join that army around Bermuda Hundred. These four regiments would all become part of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division of the 25<sup>th</sup> Corp in December of 1864. 12

USCTs that died on the lower peninsula were also buried in the National Cemetery in Yorktown.

There are no records regarding the Confederate battlefield dead. Most of them were buried on the battlefield by the Union burial details on May 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup>. They logically were not marked with name or regiment. There are no records if they were ever disinterred and moved to a mass grave or individual graves. Many folks assumed the Bucktrout burials at Cedar Grove Cemetery were a post battle or a war mass grave and that is not true. Carson Hudson and Michael Moore both suspect that a mass grave was dug somewhere in Cedar Grove, maybe near the Bucktrout burial area where the Monument stands in that cemetery. There is no entry in the *Bucktrout Order Book* in 1865 or 1866 with any type of confirmation. Fred Boelt believes that almost all of them remain where they were buried

following the battle. The number of men involved is unknown. There is no documentation of reburial, and until some proof can be found we must assume Confederate bodies were not recovered. No doubt even a few Union bodies remain on the battlefield. 13

(see more detailed information in footnotes and also the 'addendum' that follows the footnotes.)

This remaining portion of Fort Magruder (the Southwest bastion), where we are standing today, was deeded from the Benel Corporation to the Williamsburg Chapter 673 of the U.D.C. on May 31, 1951. The ladies of the Williamsburg Chapter have maintained and protected this historic fortification for the past 70 years. They have preserved a history that belongs to Williamsburg, James City County, Confederate soldiers, Union Soldiers and in that last group, the often overlooked, U. S. Colored Troops. 14

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#### Footnotes:

A1) Les, Jensen; *The 32<sup>nd</sup> Virginia Infantry, 1990, Lynchburg, p3 & p159-172.* Seven companies would make up the 32<sup>nd</sup> Virginia. A normal regiment has ten companies and some 1,000 men. The 32<sup>nd</sup> Virginia would serve the entire war as an undersized regiment. Williamsburg provided Company C: *The Williamsburg Junior Guard*; Hampton provided Company A: *The Wythe Rifles* and Company E: *The Hampton Grays*; York County provided Company F: *The Nelson Guard* and Company I: *The York Rangers*; Warwick & Elizabeth City Counties provided Company H: *The Warwick Rangers* and Company K: *The Lee Guards*. Four artillery batteries were initially part of the 32<sup>nd</sup> but were soon transferred to artillery commands: Company G: *Lee Artillery/Garrett's Battery*; 1<sup>st</sup> Company H: *James City Artillery/Hankin's Battery*; 1<sup>st</sup> Company I: *Peninsula Artillery/Cosnahan's Battery*; 1<sup>st</sup> Company K; *Washington Artillery/Smith's Hampton Battery*. The additional 3 infantry companies were never added. When General Magruder and General Johnston withdrew from the Warwick and Williamsburg lines many of the lower peninsula volunteers (80+) deserted and returned to their homes and families. They enlisted to protect their homes and families from invaders and were alienated by the withdrawal. This rendered a small regiment even smaller.

- 1) Chapman, Anne W., *Benjamin Stoddert Ewell: A Biography, 1988, Dissertations, Theses & Masters Project Papers, 153962378. p. 125-164.* Available on line under Benjamin S. Ewell and held by the SCRC, Swem Library at the College of William and Mary.
- 2) Moore, J. Michael & Quarstein, John, *Yorktown's Civil War Siege – drums Along the Warwick, 2012, Charleston, p. 53-57.* The quotes are from *A Soldier's Journal: The Civil War Letters of Maj. General Lafayette McLaws.*
- 3) *Richard Manning Bucktrout Daybook & Ledger 1850-1866* (referred to as *The Bucktrout Order Book*) Mss.Acc 1997.15, by date, Special Collections

Research Center, Swem Library, College of William and Mary *and correspondence with Mr. Carson Hudson.*

4) *Yorktown's Civil War Siege, p. 53-57.*

5) Boelt, Higgs, Hull, Kaufmann & Myers, *James City County Cemeteries – Family, Historical, Indian, Military & Slave*, 2011, Yorktown, p. 163-175.

6) *Yorktown's Civil War Siege, p.158-159.*

7) *A Short Sketch of the Fincastle Rifles*, Newton Camper, 1979, Fincastle, p. 6.

8) *New York Daily Times*, Saturday May 10, 1862, p.4 col. 1 & col. 2 “*The Battle Near Williamsburg Revised.*”

9) *Sgt. Robert W. Johnson Letter, ‘Picket Lines’* – James City Cavalry Newsletter, 11-2018, p. 4; SC01349 – Special Collections Research Center, Swem Library, College of William and Mary.

10) Correspondence and conversations with Historians Carson Hudson, J. Michael Moore, Drew Gruber & Fred Boelt.

11) *General Orders #11, ‘Picket Lines’* – James City Cavalry Newsletter, 4-2018, p.4; SC00058 – Special Collections Research Center, Swem Library, College of William and Mary.

12) National Park Service Military Unit Website; Battle Unit Details - the site provides the organizational detail of the command and a service history of the command as well as numbers of officers and men killed and wounded during the conflict.

13) Conversations and correspondence with Historians Fred Boelt, Carson Hudson, & J. Michael Moore; 1865 and 1866 entries in *The Bucktrout Order Book*; A possible source to be checked would be the *Virginia Gazette* for 1865 and 1866 for any articles on reburials of battlefield dead *{see addendum below}*.

14) Email from Mrs. Gerry Waring, President of the Williamsburg Chapter of the United Daughters of the Confederacy, February 20, 2021, detailing the transaction on May 31, 1951. Representing the U.D.C. on the deed, as parties of the second part, were Mrs. Ruby Saunders, Mrs. Hallie Wermuth and Mrs. Julia Armistead as Trustees for the Chapter. The original was mailed to Mrs. Saunders at 302 Harrison Avenue in Williamsburg.



## ADDENDUM:

May 2 / 9:14 pm Note from Carson Hudson

The *Gazette [Eastern Virginia Gazette & Advertiser]* wasn't published after the early 1860s. The presses were confiscated [*probably following the battle in May, 1862*] and used to print a Union military paper – *The Cavalier* from 1862 to 1864 – first in Williamsburg and then in Yorktown. I believe the presses weren't returned until years later. I believe one of the Lively brothers had to appeal to the Federal Government and after much legal argument recovered the presses from Fort Monroe. The *Gazette* did not resume publishing, under a different name and publisher, till years later. There were 4 Richmond papers during the war that would occasionally mention events in Williamsburg, but I've never come across anything on reburials.

May 2 / 8:52 pm Note from Fred Boelt

I was thinking more about this on my drive home this afternoon – there were basically no Confederates on the peninsula after the battle of Williamsburg. Were the Union soldiers (in 1864-1865) going to disinter the Confederate dead and relocate, I think not. The few citizens left behind were the feeble and women and children. The vast majority of the enslaved moved on as well. I seriously believe that there would be some mention of it if there was an effort to move the bodies. No, they are still where they were placed on May 6 and 7.

May 3 / 6:57 am Note to Fred Boelt and Gerry Waring before I read Fred's note above.

My hope that maybe some 1864-1866 copies of the *Virginia Gazette* were in the Swem Archives, or somewhere, is dashed by Carson's note . . . It is not logical for the Union to waste any time with the Confederate battlefield dead [*to disinter & rebury*] when they are removing the Union dead for transfer to the National Cemetery in Yorktown. It is not logical for the Williamsburg citizens or the Williamsburg / J.C.C. governments to spend any of their miniscule treasury to recover the bodies for reburial in a mass grave.

Fred your theory has all the logic. The Confederate dead are still buried on the battlefield.