

Fort Delaware

Fort Delaware is located on Pea Patch Island in the middle of the Delaware River, a mile from Delaware City. Legend has it that the island received its name during colonial days when a boat filled with peas ran aground, and the spilled peas took root in the island soil. The narrow island is two miles long and 178 acres in size. Approximately 50 acres is fast land and the rest is marsh and shifting sand bars.

In 1848, Congress approved one million dollars to construct a large, modern fort which would be the largest in the country. Construction was begun in 1849 and was not completed until 1859 with an additional cost of one million more. Locals from Wilmington or Philadelphia would venture to Pea Patch Island to picnic and observe the construction, then return home in the early evening.



The completed fort covered six acres with a two-acre parade ground enclosed. The walls were built 32 feet high from solid granite bricks. Like a castle, the fort was surrounded by a salt water moat with a drawbridge facing the Delaware shore. During the Civil War, a smaller gate was built on the New Jersey side. The massive walls supported three tiers of gun ports for protection in the event of attack. Two-three story brick houses were designed to support the men. There was hardly ever more than 200 men manning the fort.

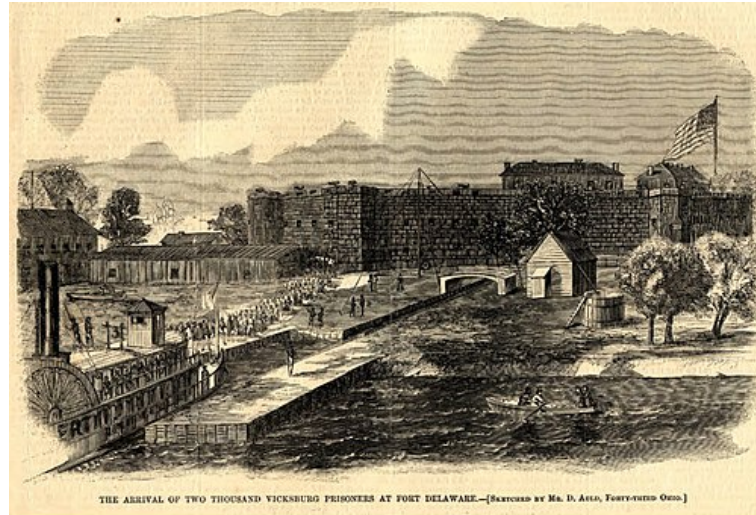
Delaware was a slave state and in the 1860 election secessionist candidates were elected. When Maryland failed to secede, it meant that Delaware would have been totally isolated and therefore could not secede. When war did break out, Delaware men went both North and South to join in the battle. Men who were outspoken against Lincoln's tactics were declared political prisoners and sent to Fort Delaware. With Lincoln's suspension of *habeas corpus*, they could be, and over 150 Delawareans were, imprisoned without a trial. Political prisoners from other states were also sent to the fort.

The first Confederate prisoners to be housed in Fort Delaware were eight men from General Joseph Johnston's troops that were captured during his retreat from Harpers Ferry and Martinsburg. Before the war was over more than 30,000 Confederate troops had been housed in Fort Delaware. When 250 men from Stonewall Jackson's brigade arrived at the fort, the Union soldiers were moved to the third floor of the houses and 200 prisoners were housed on the second floor. The remaining 50 were sent to an area known as the dungeons. Among the prisoners was eighteen-year-old Lieutenant Randolph Barton and his cousin Willis from Winchester, Virginia.

Regular Army Captain A. A. Gibson was the superintendent of the fort. He was kind and considerate to the prisoners. The army transferred him in the summer of 1862 and charged him with being a southern sympathizer. The charge was unfounded, but he had allowed Lieutenant Barton's parents to visit him. Philadelphia friends sent the Bartons food and clothing. Some unknown person even commissioned the army tailor to measure Barton for a suit of clothes.

Fortunately, Barton and the rest of the men would only spend a short time in captivity. On August 5, 1862, they boarded the steamer Merrimac and just below Richmond, Virginia, they were exchanged. By the time of the exchange there were 3,000 prisoners on Pea Patch Island. Before Gettysburg, the prison held 8,000 and

afterwards there were more than 12,500, the largest number ever held at any one time. There were 2,000 prisoners from the battle at Vicksburg. From then until the end of the war there was rarely an occasion where there was fewer than 6,000 prisoners.



After the replacement of Captain Gibson in 1862 there was a rapid replacement of superintendents. Major Henry Burton was appointed in July 1862 and replaced with Lieutenant Colonel Delephan Perkins in December of 1862. Apparently all three of these superintendents treated the prisoners humanely. This was not what Secretary of War Edwin Stanton wanted. Stanton sent Colonel Robert Buchanan in early 1863. Buchanan did not act as the man Stanton was looking for. He made the prisoners and enlarge the hospital. In April of 1863, Brigadier General Albin F. Schoepf replaced Buchanan.

Prisons on both sides of the war were people that did not have good combat records. removed from service in Tennessee. The prisoners Schoepf's assistants were bitterly hated. Prisoner George Ahl "the autocratic bashaw, who is all in assistant Lieutenant George Wolfe was hated uniform, walk through the prisoner's barracks



plans to build more barracks to house 1863, Brigadier General Albin F.

commonly placed in the command of Schoepf (Photo at right) had been respected him for his fair treatment. Randolph A. Shotwell called Captain Ahl and Ahl-fired mean." Schoepf's because he would don a Confederate and have any rule breakers punished.

Fort Delaware became known as the the only prison that kept all prisoners, generals to together. It was originally planned to house all political prisoners in either New York Harbor or Boston harbor. Commissioned officers were to be held on Johnson's Island in Lake Erie.

Brigadier General J. Johnston of North Carolina was captured at the Battle of Seven Pines in May of 1862 and was the first Confederate general to be imprisoned at the fort. The General prisoners included brigadier generals, major generals and Lieutenant General Joseph B. Wheeler who commanded the Tennessee army cavalry.

Living conditions on the island were atrocious. Enlisted men were housed in wooden barracks around the island. As the war drug on the number of prisoners increased and the deterioration of living conditions and nutrition increased in proportion which resulted in the spread of all kinds of diseases. There was an outbreak of small pox to take a large toll. The 800-bed hospital was staffed with medical personnel, but there was normally over 1,000 sick prisoners at a time. The nurses were often Confederate prisoners that had taken the oath of allegiance to the Union (known as "Galvanized Yankees) and they were hated by the sick prisoners. In the

summer, the island was hot, humid and infested with all kinds of insects. In the winter, the cold was raw and damp and often foggy. The 2,700 prisoners that died were buried on Fin's Point in New Jersey across the Delaware River.

Lieutenant Barton termed the water as putrid and warm. Lieutenant McHenry of Baltimore wrote that "the water was full of wiggle-waggles ... but were harmless when killed with a mixture of whiskey or brandy which we were allowed to get from the sutler." Most prisoners complained about the quality and taste of the food, except the bread which was baked in the fort and was praised by all for the quality.

All the prisoners dreamed of escape and many were successful in spite of the rapid current of the Delaware. On July 16, 1862, 19 men escaped and Captain Gibson telegraphed General Dixon that he only had 300 guards and more were needed. His request was denied. Three days later 200 more escaped. Dixon sent reinforcements and a guard boat that was to patrol the island 24 hours a day. The escapees used empty canteens as life preservers and landed on the Delaware shore. They hid during the day and worked their way south at night. Some were shot in the water, some were pulled into boats and returned to the prison, but many managed to reach the Confederacy and safety

12The firing of 200 guns on April 10, 1865, signaled the surrender of Robert E. Lee and the Army of Northern Virginia at Appomattox. However, it was not until July that all of the Confederate prisoners had "swallowed the yellow dog" (taken the oath of allegiance to the union) and were released.

Some political prisoner were not released, Lieutenant General Joseph Wheeler, accused of violating his parole; Texas Governor Francis Lubbock; Jefferson Davis's private secretary, Burton Harrison and Colonel William Preston Johnston who was captured with Jefferson Davis. They were joined by Major Henry Kyd Douglas, author of *I Rode With Stonewall*, who had been caught wearing his uniform in Hagerstown, Maryland.

The last prisoner to be released was Harrison on January 16, 1866. The fort remained as part of the eastern coast defense system. In 1896 the fort received \$600,000 for renovation and new guns. The fort was ready for the Spanish-American War. The fort was manned again for WWI and II. In 1943 all the guns were removed for scrap metal. In 1944 the fort was closed and declared surplus in 1945.

Today the fort is a state park and operated as a Civil War Museum. The fort is open on weekends during the summer and accessed by boat from Delaware City.



Fort Delaware as it appears today