

**The West Point Line: A Surviving Earthwork
Salient from Dix's Peninsula Campaign of 1863**

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Introduction

Tidewater Virginia was the scene of heavy fighting on two occasions during the War Between the States. The first series of battles took place in the spring of 1862, when Union General George B. McClellan led the Army of the Potomac from Hampton Roads in an unsuccessful attempt to capture Richmond. Turned back at the gates of the Confederate capital, McClellan was forced to evacuate his army from Harrison's Landing on the James River. Major engagements occurred again in 1864, when General Ulysses S. Grant moved south from the battlefields of the Wilderness and Spotsylvania Courthouse and fought his way around the east side of Richmond to the James River. This campaign culminated in the lengthy siege of Petersburg.

The in-between year of 1863 was a relatively quieter time in Tidewater. As Confederate General Robert E. Lee took the offensive in the late spring of that year, the focus of the war in the East shifted to Northern Virginia, Maryland, and Pennsylvania. The major battles were being fought elsewhere, and the coastal plain was the scene of smaller conflicts significant mostly to those who became their casualties.

Tidewater remained a strategically important area throughout the war as Union forces sought to establish control over the entire seacoast of the Confederacy. A naval blockade, amphibious landings, and the establishment of coastal fortresses were part of the Northern plan to strangle the South both economically and militarily. In Virginia, Federal troops based at Fortress Monroe had extended their sphere of military control to Norfolk, Yorktown, and areas along the Eastern Shore by the middle of 1862. Protected from Confederate attack by the superior firepower of Union warships, these toeholds became staging areas for military operations that reached into the interior portions of the Commonwealth.

West Point was strategically important because of its location at the head of the York River, a major avenue of access from Hampton Roads to areas east and north of Richmond. Military forces stationed in West Point also could control the navigable portions of the Mattaponi and Pamunkey rivers, which are tributaries of the York. Furthermore, West Point was the terminus of the Richmond and York River Railroad, a transportation link with the Confederate capital that had been completed in 1860.

Confederate forces realized West Point's value at the outset of hostilities in 1861 and immediately began to transfer artillery from Richmond to the town via the railroad. Union forces also recognized West Point's strategic importance. On three occasions during the war—May 1862, May 1863, and May 1864—Union forces seized the town and occupied it for varying periods of time. During the times when Federal forces left the town, Confederate forces filtered back in. On October 31, 1862, U.S. Marines from the USS *Mahaska* raided West Point to destroy artillery positions that had been rebuilt by Confederates following the Union withdrawal during the previous summer.

The Federal occupations of West Point in 1862 and 1864 took place during McClellan's and Grant's campaigns against Richmond, respectively. In 1862, McClellan sent an amphibious force up the York River with the intention of launching an attack

upon the flank of Confederate forces retreating from Yorktown and Williamsburg. Union forces were transported by ship to Brickhouse Point on the York River. Their attempt to fall upon the Confederate flank near Barhamsville was blunted by a Confederate counter-attack. The Battle of Eltham's Landing, sometimes called the Battle of West Point, was fought entirely in New Kent County.¹ Although Federal troops occupied West Point at the time of this battle, their stay was brief.

On May 1, 1864, following a pattern that must have become tiresome to the residents of West Point, 2500 Union troops under the command of Brigadier General Isaac Wistar were landed from the transports USS *Morse* and USS *General Putnam*. On this occasion, the occupation of West Point was a feint, designed to draw the Confederates' attention away from Grant's southward movements that would result in horrific battles—the Wilderness, Spotsylvania Courthouse, and Cold Harbor—farther to the west.

The in-between year of 1863 saw the lengthiest occupation of West Point by Federal forces. This occupation also left the most indelible impression on the town.

Dix's Peninsula Campaign of 1863

In the spring of 1863, the primary offensive operation for the North was Major General Joseph Hooker's advance southward with the Army of the Potomac across a line formed by the Rappahannock and Rapidan rivers in the vicinity of Fredericksburg. Simultaneously, Major General John A. Dix, commanding the Department of Virginia, was ordered to seize Gloucester Point and West Point as bases of operations for Union troops in Tidewater.

Dix was one of the oldest officers in the Union Army. Born in 1798, he had fought in the War of 1812 as a fourteen-year-old ensign. When Abraham Lincoln became President, he invited Dix, then a former New York senator, to become Secretary of the Treasury. During his brief tenure in the cabinet, Dix issued his famous "American Flag Dispatch" at the outbreak of the war. Concerned that disloyal officers in the Revenue Cutter Service (forerunner of the Coast Guard) might turn their vessels over to the Confederacy, Dix ordered, "If anyone attempts to haul down the American flag, shoot him on the spot."

Lincoln quickly decided that Dix's aggressive nature might be put to better use, and gave him a major-general's commission. In the spring of 1863, the President was relying on these qualities as he ordered Dix to open a second front that would threaten the Confederate capital.

Dix ordered Union troops to Gloucester Point and West Point. Working independently or in concert, these formations were charged with the destruction of supplies or resources that would aid the Confederate war effort. Raiders from West Point would reach out into King William and King and Queen counties. Raiders from Gloucester Point would leave a path of destruction in Gloucester and Mathews counties. Forges and blacksmith shops were to be wrecked, steamboat landings were to be demolished, food supplies were to be destroyed, and mules and horses were to be seized. Anything that might

¹ Both common names for this engagement actually are misnomers. No fighting occurred in the town of West Point or at the landing for Eltham Plantation on the Pamunkey River. Combat was restricted to an area between the present-day villages of Eltham and Barhamsville.

aid the Confederate will to wage war was considered fair game, regardless of the effect this destruction might have on the civilian population. Additionally, the occupying forces were to observe as closely as possible the extent to which Lee weakened the defenses of Richmond to support his operations against Hooker.

Occupation of West Point in 1863

Dix ordered Brigadier General George Henry Gordon, a peacetime lawyer with a degree from Harvard, to ferry his division from Yorktown to West Point, where it arrived without incident on May 7, 1863. The division consisted of six infantry regiments, two batteries of artillery, and some cavalry.²

The Union soldiers immediately began building defenses that would protect them from Confederate attack. As laid out by the Army topographical engineers, the line of earthworks and supporting batteries was to extend across the peninsula between the Pamunkey and Mattaponi rivers. This defensive configuration would protect the troops occupying West Point from any attack launched from upper King William County. For even greater protection, Union gunboats were anchored in the Pamunkey and Mattaponi rivers on both flanks of this “West Point Line.”

Contemporary accounts describe the feverish activity involved in constructing the defensive works. Corporal Henry W. Prince of the 127th New York wrote in his diary for May 7, 1863: “Left Fort Monroe this morn for Yorktown. There received orders to go to West Point. Landed about 2 P.M. Marched about a mile. Took shovels, went to work throwing up breastworks. Worked until 11 P.M.” A few days later he recorded: “Sunday 10th. Pleasant. Regt to work building a battery. Heathenish way to keep the Sabbath.” Nine days later, Corporal John Emery Morris of the 22nd Connecticut wrote his uncle to say, “We are still engaged in the old business, digging, though not so *furiously* as at first, we do not work nights, now, nor Sundays.”

Private Franklin McGrath, also of the 127th New York, offered a more detailed account of the initial construction on May 7:

Each man having been furnished with a shovel, or pickaxe, our regiment marched about one and one-half miles up the Richmond & York Railroad, where we halted and stacked arms in the edge of a fine piece of woods fronting an open plain about one mile wide, which was situated between the Richmond and York Railroad and the County road to Richmond, and at once commenced throwing up a line of entrenchments. . . . The men worked until 10 p.m. in a drizzling rain, digging and carrying railroad ties with which to face the works. The rain made the work difficult and the men were ready for a rest when the order was given, even if they were not quite prepared for the advance of an enemy. . . . The next morning at 4 o’clock the regiment was again set at work on the entrenchments and dug till noon. This line of entrenchments, when completed, extended from the Pamunkey on the left to the swamps bordering the Mattaponi on the right, with three earthworks a little in advance, one at the center and one at each end (McGrath 45, 46).

In addition to these written accounts, two contemporary maps survive that show the West Point Line constructed in May of 1863. One is a plan prepared by the topographical engineer attached to Gordon’s Division. The other is a freehand version

² The infantry regiments were the 22nd Connecticut, the 40th Massachusetts, and the 127th, 141st, 142nd, and 143rd New York. The artillery units were the 2nd and 4th Independent Batteries, Wisconsin Light Artillery.

drawn by the letter writer John Emery Morris. Both maps show a line of works extending from the Pamunkey River, with a redan and traverse³ located between the river and the right-of-way of the Richmond and York River Railroad (now the Norfolk Southern Railway). The line extends along the present length of Oak Grove Street, with a salient constructed near its intersection with what is now King William Avenue (“the County road” in McGrath’s description). The line then zigzags along the east side of King William Avenue until it extends eastward along a line roughly parallel to the present Thompson Avenue. A third salient anchors the eastern end of the defensive line close to the place where Thompson Avenue now crosses West Point Creek. Neither map shows the earthwork extending eastward beyond West Point Creek. This area, low-lying and swampy in 1863, was apparently unsuitable for military entrenchments.

McGrath’s account adds details about the impact of these entrenchments on the existing landscape and the armaments with which the Union forces planned to protect themselves from attack:

Our Brigade held the left of the line, the 127th being formed in the shape of the letter L on the County road and behind rifle pits to the left of the road. The ground in front of the works was cleared by pulling down a large granary⁴ and by burning eight or ten log slave huts to afford free range for the Union guns.

Many of the men were engaged in carrying railroad ties with which to revet the works, and also to build platforms for the twenty-pound Parrott guns with which the outworks were armed The regiment continued working on the forts till the 13th (McGrath 46).

McGrath reports that the West Point fortifications were named “Fort Scales,” not to honor a fallen officer, as often was the case, but to mark the absence of a uniform item that particularly annoyed many Union soldiers. Brass scales, worn as epaulettes on the soldiers’ coats, were designed to protect the shoulders and arms from the slashes of cavalry sabers. In most regiments, these shoulder scales were discarded fairly early in the war. They were just one more item that needed to be polished and, in the soldiers’ eyes, were worthless as protection in battle.

On the 24th [of May] General Gordon, having received information that General E.O.C. Ord had been appointed to the command of the troops at West Point, ordered an inspection of all the troops. The 127th were ordered to turn out in full-dress uniform, with dress coats and brass shoulder scales. The regiment, notwithstanding the loss of its scales, presented a very neat, soldierly appearance, and General Gordon expressed himself as proud to command such a fine body of troops. But the disciplinarians were not satisfied, and after the inspection was over those of the regiment who did not have shoulder scales were set at work with axe and shovel digging up the stumps of trees around camp. . . . The men after this stump-digging experience dubbed the fort at West Point “Fort Scales” (McGrath 48).

³ A redan is an earthwork curved outward to face the enemy and designed to protect a battery of artillery; a traverse is a straight trench that protects the battery in the event of an attack from the rear. Together, they roughly approximate an upper-case *D*, as viewed from above. Both the contemporary maps and existing topography clearly show this configuration.

⁴ The Old Dominion Grain Corporation’s silos still occupy the site where their unfortunate predecessor stood in 1863.

Federal Withdrawal from West Point in 1863

As often occurs in warfare, unexpected events create sudden changes in plan. By the time Union troops arrived in West Point, Hooker had been defeated by Lee at Chancellorsville (May 1–4, 1863) and the Army of Northern Virginia had seized the offensive. By the end of June, Confederate troops were in Pennsylvania, and on July 1–3, 1863, a crucial battle was fought at Gettysburg.

Lincoln believed that the war could be ended with a vigorous follow-up of the victory at Gettysburg. He urged the Army of the Potomac to pursue and destroy what remained of Lee's invading force. Union formations had been too bloodied by the bitter fighting in Pennsylvania to satisfy Lincoln's expectations, however. Fresh troops would be needed to complete the destruction of the Army of Northern Virginia. Where would such reinforcements be found?

The War Department in Washington looked for reinforcements in Tidewater Virginia. By the night of July 8, 1863, Federal troops that had been based in West Point were marching back to Yorktown for transport to Northern Virginia. Their line of defenses, constructed with such energy, was emptied of its garrison and its weapons.

The West Point Line Today

Erosion, the plow, and the bulldozer have virtually eradicated most of the earthen defense works thrown up in the spring of 1863. Residential and commercial development have hastened the process by which these features are erased from the landscape. Hurricane Isabel, which struck West Point in September 2003, took its own toll by bringing down hundreds of mature trees in the town. Only at the westernmost end of the West Point Line, along Oak Grove Street and in the wooded area between the railroad tracks and the river, are there significant surviving features of this defensive network. There, on a bluff above the Pamunkey River, a remaining earthwork salient still may be traced among trees that have grown up on its ramparts and in its ditch. It offers mute testimony to a little-known episode of the War Between the States, waiting still, in its woodland setting, to repel an attack that never came.

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The Author

William A. Palmer, Jr. was born and raised on Long Island and has been a resident of West Point since 2000. He serves as minister of the West Point Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

He is the great-great-grandson of Private Daniel Denton, Company D, 127th New York Volunteer Infantry, who was stationed with his regiment in West Point during the spring of 1863. Denton was born May 13, 1831, in Flatlands, Kings County, New York. A bayman by trade, he was described on the August 22, 1862, muster record as being six feet tall, with a dark complexion, blue eyes, and light hair. He served in the 127th regiment throughout the Civil War and was mustered out at Charleston, South Carolina, on June 30, 1865. Following the war, Denton lived in the village of Canarsie and returned to fishing in Jamaica Bay, on the south shore of Long Island. In 1887, he was impaneled to serve at a coroner's inquest following the capsizing on the yacht *Mystery*, with the loss of twenty-three of its passengers and crew, in the Canarsie Channel. He died in Kings County on December 22, 1898.