

Attack on the *Swan* and Federal Evacuation of West Point, 1863

By

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A single salvo from a Confederate battery, which missed its intended target, led to the evacuation of Union forces from West Point at the end of May 1863. The target was the unarmed mail boat *Swan*, which was carrying soldiers' letters and civilian passengers from Yorktown to West Point, where Gordon's federal division had been digging in since the earlier part of the month. The attackers likely were members of Wise's Brigade, which had been posted to defend the eastern approaches to Richmond and keep an eye on the Yankees while the main body of the Army of Northern Virginia grappled with the Army of the Potomac in the vicinity of Fredericksburg.

Shortly after three o'clock on the afternoon of May 23, cannon fire erupted from the New Kent County shore of the York River, about four miles below West Point. Brigadier General George H. Gordon was informed of the attack at his headquarters in West Point and immediately summoned the gunboat U.S.S. *Morse*, under the command of Lieutenant Commander Charles A. Babcock, to steam downriver and protect the *Swan*. An appeal also was sent to the U.S.S. *Mystic*, on station in the Mattaponi River near West Point, to assist.

Both *Morse* and *Mystic* had accompanied Gordon's Division to West Point. While the infantry hastily constructed a defensive line of entrenchments that stretched across the peninsula on which the town is situated, the ships were stationed in the Pamunkey and Mattaponi rivers, respectively, to protect the army's flanks with their heavy guns. Neither ship was a first-rate vessel, however, and their deficiencies soon would become evident.

U.S.S. *Morse* began its life as a wooden sidewheel ferryboat designed for use in the rivers adjacent to New York City. Acquired by the government in 1861, *Morse*'s flat bottom and shallow draft made it ideal for the ascent of Virginia's tidal rivers. Initially armed with nine-inch guns, fore and aft, *Morse* was equipped in May 1863 with a single nine-inch gun and a 100-pounder Parrott rifle.¹

U.S.S. *Mystic*, a larger ship, had been built in 1853 and successively had borne the names U.S.S. *Mount Savage* and U.S.S. *Memphis*.² In September 1862 the rechristened *Mystic* collided with another Union vessel off the coast of North Carolina. Although repaired, the 452-ton screw steamship was a shadow of its former self. Little more than a week

¹ "USS Morse (1861)." *Wikipedia*. Online. 12 May 2008.

² Department of the Navy–Navy Historical Center. *Steamship Mount Savage (1853–1868)*. 9 Nov. 2003. Online. Internet. 6 May 2008. Available <http://www.history.navy.mil/photos/sh-civil/civilsh-m/mt-savge.htm>.

after the firing on the *Swan*, a naval officer's assessment of the vessel was that "The *Mystic* is so broken down that she is perfectly unfit for cruising."³

By the time *Morse* arrived at the place in the York River where *Swan* had been bracketed by Confederate fire, the attackers probably had already limbered up their artillery and made their escape. Nevertheless, Commander Babcock maneuvered the ship in such a way as to bring both his guns to bear on the wooded shoreline. The most significant casualty of this shelling apparently was *Morse* itself, as the former civilian vessel rocked beneath the recoil of heavy guns. Babcock later reported,

Two of my breeching carried away, one IX-inch at the second fire and one 100-pounder Parrott after firing four rounds; also two side tackle blocks split at IX-inch gun and one rammer and handspike, also at IX-inch, broken....The breeching bolts all held good, but the forward part of the house is very much shattered, and a great many windows fore and aft broken.⁴

By the time *Morse*'s guns had fallen silent, the gunboat was joined by *Mystic* and a tug bearing General Gordon. Gordon directed a party of sailors to go ashore in small boats and search for the long-gone enemy.

Obviously frustrated by his inability to come to grips with the attackers, Gordon suggested that Babcock order his sailors to burn a dozen structures, three of them residences, in the vicinity from which the Confederate shots had been fired. Babcock reported that his men found "three full of corn, three full of bacon, three outhouses, and three dwelling houses. After firing the houses the boats returned on board in safety."⁵

When the *Swan* made its regular run upriver on the following day, it was accompanied from Yorktown by the U.S.S. *Western World*. Later that evening, lights were reported in the vicinity where *Swan* had been fired upon the previous day. *Western World*, under the command of Acting Master Samuel B. Gregory, proceeded to the spot and threw sixteen shells from its 30- and 32-pounder Parrott rifles onto the New Kent shoreline for good measure.⁶

Ripple effects from these actions almost immediately made their way up the naval chain of command. In a letter, dated June 3, 1863, Babcock's superior, Lieutenant Commander J. H. Gillis, made a case for the burning of civilian property to Rear Admiral S. P. Lee, commander of the North Atlantic Blockading Squadron:

In reply to your letter of the 30th of May, in reference to the burning of certain buildings on York River below West Point by Lieutenant-Commander Babcock, of the *Morse*, I would state that upon investigation I find that the buildings were burned because the rebels had placed their battery in front of and on each side of

³ *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion*. Series 1, Vol. 9: North Atlantic Blockading Squadron, from May 5, 1863, to May 5, 1864. Washington: GPO, 1899, 52.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*, 43.

them, and were in occupation of them at the time, the officer in command being in the largest one and watching the effect of and directing the firing. The occupants of the houses had all been sent away before the attack on the *Swan* was made. No search of the buildings was instituted, and the only property I can learn of being brought off is a thermometer and an old clock, which were brought off by the men of the *Morse*. The former is on board the *Morse* and the latter was taken ashore by the adjutant-general at West Point.

General Gordon was on board of the *Morse* at the time the buildings were burned and considered the act perfectly justifiable, and the opinion of both himself and General Keyes is that if the prompt measures which were taken by Lieutenant-Commander Babcock had not been taken, the consequence would have been that every unarmed boat that passed up and down the river would have been fired into unless convoyed by a gunboat.

The three buildings were owned, respectively, by the following-named men: Woodhouse, Lacy, and Blossingham [*sic*]. Mr. Woodhouse lives in Richmond, and his house was occupied by his overseer, a man by the name of Drake. Mr. Lacy occupied his own house, and is reputed to be a strong secessionist, and is magistrate of New Kent County.⁷ He has aided and abetted the rebel cause. Mr. Blossingham also occupied his own house, and is a strong secessionist. He has a substitute in the rebel army. I have obtained all this information from Mr. Wright, who has lived in that neighborhood and knows all the parties.⁸

Gillis relies upon a local informant, “Mr. Wright,” who identifies the owners of the destroyed property and attests to their secessionist proclivities. In the *Atlas to Accompany the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, an 1864 map of New Kent County shows, on the York River, the home sites in close proximity of two of the men named by Gillis. Just upstream from the place where Filbates Creek flows into the York may be seen the names “E. B. Lacy” and “W. Blasenham” [*sic*].⁹ Surviving New Kent County land records show that the Woodhouse plantation was located on the opposite side of Filbates Creek from the residences of Lacy and Blassenham.

Edmund B. Lacy is listed in the 1870 Federal Census of New Kent County as living along the York River in Ware Creek Township. According to the *New Kent County Deed Book*, James N. Goddin and his wife, Mary Ann, sold a tract of land containing a little more than 75 acres to Edmund B. Lacy on Christmas Day, 1865. One of the witnesses to this transaction was James Woodhouse.¹⁰ Less than a year later, Lacy obtained a deed of trust “secured by Lacy’s 200 ac where he formerly resided, adj. lands of John R.

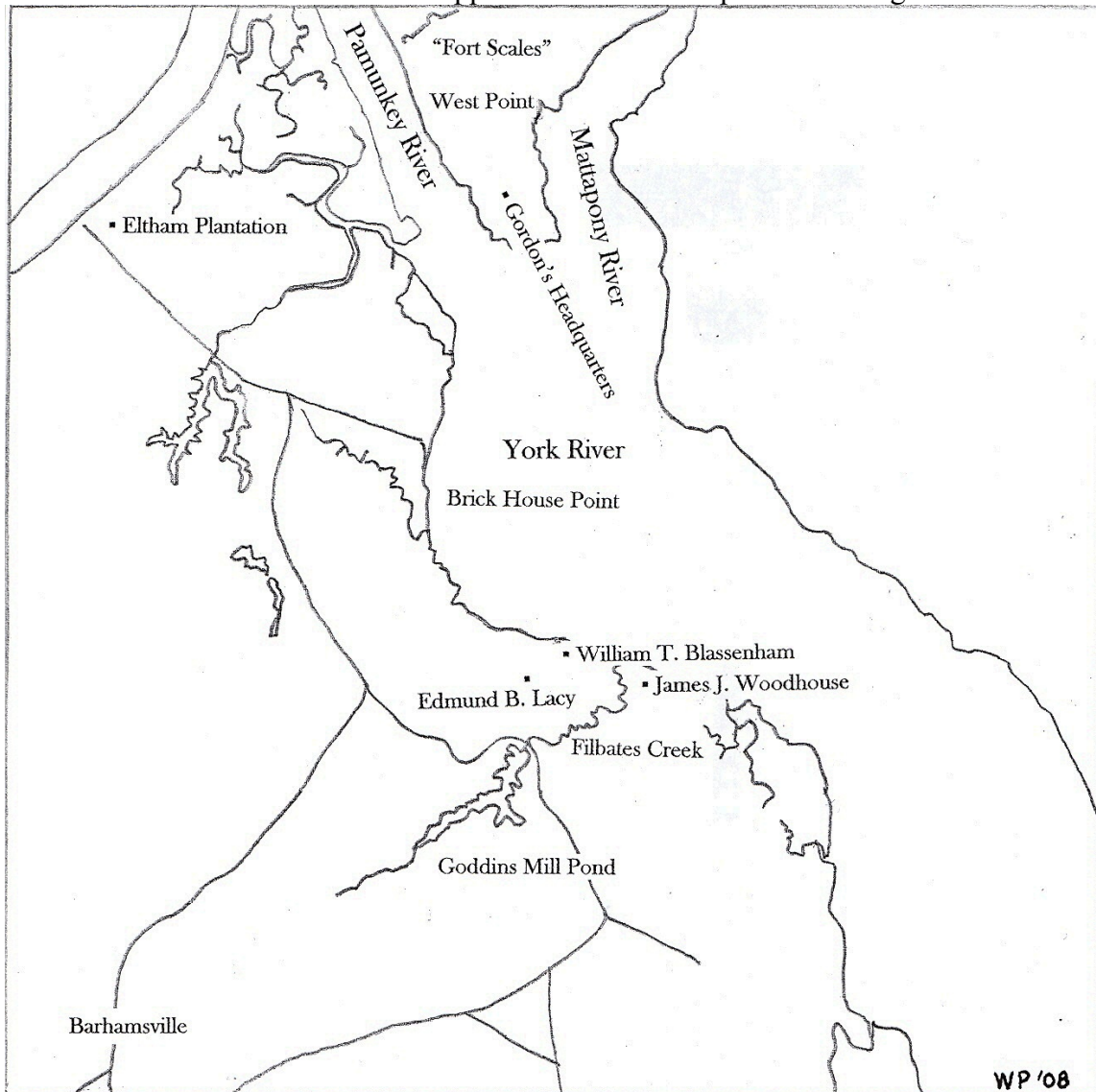
⁷ Gillis’s informant may have confused Edmund B. Lacy with Richmond T. Lacy (September 1, 1800–August 29, 1877), who was both a New Kent County magistrate and the owner of numerous parcels in the county, including Eltham Plantation.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁹ Evans, June Banks, ed. *New Kent County, Virginia, Deed Book 1, 1864–1872*. New Orleans: Bryn Ffylliaid, 1995, 9. Fires destroyed New Kent County records in 1787, 1862, and 1865. Evans notes that many older deeds were re-recorded after the fire of 1865. However, much has been irretrievably lost.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 29.

Williams & James N. Goddin,” to have Andrew P. Richardson “pay cost of erecting \$500 dwelling house upon Lacy’s land for Lacy’s use and occupation.”¹¹ It’s quite possible that this new house was a replacement for the one destroyed by the Union sailors. The lands of Williams and Goddin also appear on the 1864 map in the same general area.



Years after the war, a soldier of the 127th New York Volunteers recalled a bivouac in what may have been the vicinity of the burned Lacy house:

We took up our quarters in what had once been a garden of some wealthy planter, who had left. The chimneys were still standing, although the house had been destroyed. We had a very pleasant time during the few days we remained here. We put up our tents on poles cut from fig trees, which grew finely in this beautiful spot. The bank upon which we had our bivouac was elevated quite a distance above the river, where a gunboat was anchored near by, from which we could

¹¹ Ibid., 21.

hear the bells strike every half hour. Our company remained together during the day, but at night divided into squads and stationed along the bank of the river, on the lookout for any rebels who might venture to show themselves.¹²

William T. Blassenham also appears in the 1870 Federal Census in Ware Creek Township. In that year he was a forty-year-old waterman, living with his wife, Mildred A., also forty years old, who was engaged “keeping house.” Four children between the ages of four and seventeen are listed with their parents. The *New Kent County Deed Book* records that Blassenham and his wife sold five acres to Alonzo Tyree on January 8, 1859.¹³ On February 22, 1872, Blassenham purchased 35 acres from Joseph and Emily Glazebrook for \$600.¹⁴

James J. Woodhouse, twenty-seven years old, also is listed as living in New Kent County in the 1870 census. The Woodhouse name does not appear, however, on the 1864 map, which may confirm Gillis’s statement that this family was residing in Richmond during the war.

No Wright families appear in the neighborhood on the 1864 map. However, in 1870, Robert B. Wright, a thirty-five-year-old fisherman, is living with his wife, Martha J., and children Joana, John, and Martha in Ware Creek Township.

Enclosed with Commander Gillis’s report to Admiral Lee was a copy of a letter General Gordon, as ranking officer on the scene, had sent to Commander Babcock. Gordon was a Harvard-educated attorney in civilian life, and his rationale for suggesting retaliatory measures against civilian property reads like a legal brief:

You have asked my opinion as to whether you were justified in causing the destruction by burning of private houses on the York River, near the location of a rebel battery which fired upon my mail boat in her passage from Yorktown to West Point, Va., on the date of the 23rd of May, 1863. This rebel battery, secretly placed in position, opened fire on an unarmed mail and passenger boat in which women and children are often conveyed, and on which women were passengers at the time of the firing. I requested you to proceed to the position of the battery as soon as the firing was reported to me. You went immediately, but were unable to inflict any punishment upon the guerrillas, who fled at your approach. Seeing no mode of properly punishing the perpetrators of this outrage and preventing its recurrence, but by a retaliatory act which should interest the residents of the York River in petitioning their rulers to prevent acts not justified in warfare of civilized nations, I suggested the burning of the dwellings immediately around the scene of the firing. You took the responsibility and burned three dwelling houses. I entirely justify your course, and commend its efficient workings to other commanders. Since your punishment of guerrillas not another shot has been fired at my boat.

¹² McGrath, Franklin. *The History of the 127th New York Volunteers “Monitors” in the War for the Preservation of the Union—September 8th, 1862, June 30th, 1865*. n.p.: 1898, 47.

¹³ Evans, 12.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 85.

Condemning as I do, as barbarous in the extreme, all destruction of private property in the land of an enemy not made necessary by the exigencies of war, I fully, in the case above, justify your action.¹⁵

Gordon's reference to "guerrillas" suggests, on the one hand, that justification for his course of action was strengthened in the face of opponents who did not subscribe to the rules for "warfare of civilized nations." On the other hand, his conviction that the Union garrison in West Point was being harassed only by small irregular forces may be an indication that Gordon's assessment of his security situation was seriously flawed.

Just two days before the attack on the *Swan*, a detachment of twenty men from Company D, 127th New York Volunteers, had been sent to the New Kent shore on a night reconnaissance mission. Arriving at the very place where the Confederate battery would be set up two days later, they surprised a small body of cavalry pickets who rode off so quickly that they left their blankets behind.¹⁶ No doubt this activity was reported to Gordon, who seems to have been unable to make the connection. Enemy cavalry in possession of light artillery was unlikely to be a guerrilla or home-guard unit. As long as the commanding general believed that his vital and vulnerable supply line was being harassed by nothing more than small bodies of guerrillas, the entire garrison at West Point was in danger.

It's possible that the War Department in Washington shared this anxiety, because the day following the firing on the *Swan*, Major General Edward Otho Cresap Ord was sent from Washington to assume command at West Point. Ord was a seasoned combat commander. His victory at the Battle of Hatchies River in Tennessee on October 5, 1862, was purchased at the cost of a serious leg wound. While convalescing, Ord had been serving on an army commission in Washington. By May 1863, he was ready to return to active service.

Ord's arrival in West Point was the occasion for a full-dress turnout of the troops there and a matter of some embarrassment for the colonel of the 127th New York. Like many Union soldiers, members of his regiment had lost or thrown away the brass epaulettes known as shoulder scales. Designed to protect the shoulders and arms from the slashes of cavalry sabers, they were deemed outmoded and useless by the rank and file, simply another item that required polishing. After the inspection, soldiers without scales were assigned to dig out stumps. Ever after, the earthworks at West Point were known by the unofficial name, "Fort Scales."¹⁷

But Ord's discerning eye took note of more than missing shoulder scales. As formidable as the line of earthworks stretching across West Point's peninsula might seem, the almost 5000 Union soldiers there had their backs, if not to the wall, certainly up against wide tidal rivers over which there would be no easy retreat. The most immediate threat, however, was posed by an attack on the Union supply line between West Point and Yorktown. And the Confederates were demonstrating that they could launch such an at-

¹⁵ *Official Records*, 41–42.

¹⁶ McGrath, 47.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 48.

tack at almost any point along the York River. The new commander's recommendation was that the West Point garrison be increased by "at least four thousand additional troops, twenty-eight guns and a thirteen hundred yard pontoon bridge with which to bridge the Pamunkey, and thus afford safe communication with Yorktown."¹⁸

Armed with these proposals, Ord left West Point to meet with Major General John A. Dix, commander of the Department of Virginia, at Yorktown. Upon his arrival there, however, a telegram was waiting to inform him of his appointment, on May 18, to command the XIII Corps, then engaged in the siege of Vicksburg. Ord left immediately to join General U. S. Grant in Mississippi, and Gordon resumed command at West Point.

Although tactically sound, Ord's assessment was, in the end, no more realistic than Gordon's. Wise's Brigade, tasked with defending the eastern approaches to Richmond between the James and Mattaponi rivers, consisted of four infantry regiments,¹⁹ an artillery battalion, and a few companies of cavalry. Its effectiveness was multiplied by an intimate knowledge of the landscape and a supportive civilian population, but its few hundred soldiers were spread too thinly to mount the kind of coordinated attack envisioned by Ord. At best, they could strike as they had, with hit-and-run assaults on West Point's vulnerable York River supply line.

Nevertheless, E.O.C. Ord's brief tenure as commander at West Point and recommendations for its defense were sufficient to change Dix's thinking about continuing to hold the town. Unable to muster the reinforcements Ord requested, Dix ordered a withdrawal. By the beginning of June the entire garrison had boarded steamers that conveyed it to Yorktown. Gordon reported to Dix on June 1 that

I have the honor to report the successful removal of the force under my command from West Point, without the loss of a single man or the abandonment of a single dollar's worth of Government property. About 7 p.m. this evening, just twenty-four hours after the movement commenced, I removed the planking of the wharf and sailed from the post.²⁰

The beginning of the end for the 1863 federal occupation of West Point came with a bang of Confederate artillery, a salvo that missed its target but nevertheless had a profound effect on this small chapter in the story of the Civil War.

The author is Publications Chairman of the Historical Society of West Point and the great-great grandson of Private Daniel Denton, Company D, 127th New York Infantry, who was stationed in West Point in 1863. During his Civil War service Denton was charged for losing a cartridge box belt, cartridge box belt plate, cartridge box plate, gun

¹⁸ Ibid., 49.

¹⁹ The infantry regiments of Wise's Brigade were the 26th Virginia, 34th Virginia, 46th Virginia, and 59th Virginia.

²⁰ *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies.* Series 1, Vol. 18, Part 1 (Suffolk). Washington: GPO, 1901, 372.

slings, and wiper (a device screwed onto the ramrod to clean the weapon) but apparently held onto his shoulder scales. The author is grateful for the research assistance of Terri Lindsay.