

Trench Nerds Work Over the Bermuda Hundred Lines 2006 by David W. Lowe

In early March 2006, members of the CWFSG, convened in Chesterfield County, Virginia, to tour the rapidly disappearing fortifications of the Bermuda Hundred Line. Led by knowledgeable guide, preservation activist, and Harley enthusiast George Fickett, and assisted by Scott Williams, the group was privileged to visit much of what survives the development that encroaches from all sides. After dinner on Wednesday, those who had arrived followed a GIS map provided by George to climb the wooded hill behind our motel where was located a remnant of Confederate rifle trench constructed in May 1864



I-95 Earthwork at Twilight

to counter the unexpected arrival of Ben “The Beast” Butler’s Army of the James at Bermuda Hundred. Despite the traffic noise of I-95 that somewhat inhibited conversation, the group embraced this rifle trench—several hundred yards long—as though it were some exotic endangered species, which in many ways, it is. In mid-June 1864, when Petersburg was threatened by Grant’s passage over the James, Confederate General P.G.T. Beauregard ordered his troops to abandon the defenses that had “bottled up” Butler and hasten to the aid of the beleaguered Cockade City. Discovering his opponents’

absence the next morning, Butler hesitantly probed to the west, but until now, no-one knew quite how far. Federal skirmishers obviously reached this position next to the Interstate because they dug foxholes on the outside of the Confederate line at standard intervals. This simple rifle trench had much to tell us, and we stayed until the possums were emerging and it was too dark to see.

On Thursday the group took an excursion back to July-August 1862 for comparative purposes. George arranged for the group to visit about half of the surviving fortifications erected by the Army of the Potomac at Harrison’s Landing. Here George McClellan huddled with his army on the bank of the James after achieving an overwhelming victory over Bobby Lee at Malvern Hill. The site, located behind Kimmige’s Creek was complicated terrain to defend. The front was dissected by ravines, and the group discerned how the AoP’s engineers grappled with the problem. At first, they built rather large, straight artillery works to cut off the base of



Harrison's Landing

tongues of land that protruded toward the creek. Seemingly as an afterthought, they constructed rifle trenches for infantry following the military crest overlooking the creek. These rapid rifle trenches had an improvised feel. On one “tongue” it appeared the engineers had rethought their original placement of the artillery and constructed another parapet slightly to the front that took better advantage of the terrain. It was clear they were learning by experience. The dirt never lies.

Time for lunch and had it not been for El Presidente’s stern admonitions over the walky-talky, Dr. Phil would likely still be there for he had discovered a zig-zag communications trench that led from the creek back up through a ravine past supply caches, a command post, and leading to ... we don’t know... maybe, McClellan’s headquarters? Lunch was pieced together on picnic tables in the fish hatchery. Not a hundred yards from the picnic ground, the Union line picked up and headed south, which the group followed for a quarter mile before turning back. Acting on faulty military intelligence, Lowe was under the impression that Williams had continued ahead into the thicket and offered to follow to inform him that the group was returning to the vehicles.

There are good intentions and then there are good intentions. Within ten minutes and fifty yards, it was clear to Lowe that no-one could possibly have preceded him through the undergrowth. Despite his ever-handly briar nippers, Lowe found himself entangled in a briar patch that (in his considerable experience) had no equal. He turned back to find that the path he had so carefully groomed through the thicket had been swallowed up behind him, confirming that Virginia greenbriers are not isolated strands of flesh-stripping undergrowth, but an active, predatory community. Lowe eventually extricated himself and jogged back through the woods to the picnic ground to breathlessly report his findings, but ... the vans were even then pulling away. Look in your rearview mirror. Pleeeeeease. As it turned out, Mr. Williams had already returned to the vehicles and somebody figured out that Lowe was dangling. He was rescued.

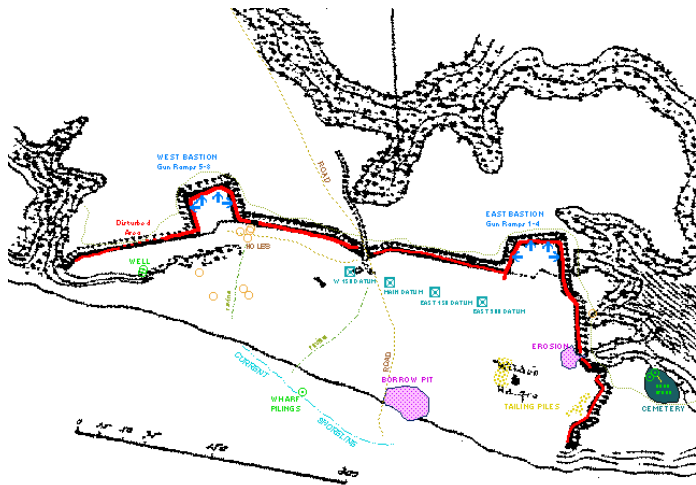
On a perfectly warm and delightful afternoon, we visited the fortification at Wilson’s Wharf, not far from Charles City Court House. Fort Pocahontas was one of the first fortifications built in May 1864 during the Bermuda 100 campaign when Butler’s armada steamed up James River to threaten Richmond and Petersburg. Its purpose was to protect the deep shipping channel that at this point in the river passes very near the left bank. A passing modern tanker on the river underscored the point. We could have tossed stones onto the deck. From here atop the steep bluff, Secesh artillery would have had a plunging fire on passing ships.



Ft. Pocahontas at Wilson's Wharf

The fort was constructed by USCTs under command of Brig. Gen. Edward Wild, an abolitionist and early proponent of recruiting black soldiers. The 18-foot wide parapet with an exterior ditch forms a semi-circle of about 1500 yards with two artillery demi-bastions (built for eight field guns) and with both flanks resting on the river. On May 24, 1864, 2,500 dismounted Rebel cavalymen commanded by Maj. Gen. Fitzhugh Lee attacked the fort after first announcing that if the USCTs didn’t

surrender they would be given no quarter. The “no quarter” threat was prah-bah-blee a mistake coming on the heels of recent reports of the massacre at Fort Pillow. The USCTs fought with grim ferocity, repulsing the Rebs on all fronts. Fort Pocahontas is preserved and protected by Mr. Harrison Tyler, the grandson (!) of President John Tyler. The Tyler family home, Sherwood Forest, is right up the road and open to the public.



Fort Pocahontas at Wilson's Wharf

After lingering to admire the river view, we made two small detours along the River Road (Rte. 5) back toward Richmond. We attempted to follow a Virginia Civil War Trails sign to view the site of the Army of the Potomac's famous pontoon bridge over the James at Weyanoke Neck but were pulled up short at a multi-branching intersection posted no trespassing on all fronts. There *is* access to the bridge site but someone had perversely removed the sign that would have pointed us in the right

direction. Disappointed, we turned back not wanting to needlessly antagonize the locals. We had better luck with the next CWT sign that guided us to Wilcox's Wharf, where the Union VI Corps boarded transports to cross, even as their comrades used the pontoon bridge downriver. An interpretive sign and, again, a stunning river view.

In the evening, we were treated to a buffet and a private tour of the Pamplin Park Museum of the Civil War Soldier outside Petersburg, organized by executive director A. Wilson Greene. Will Greene, a former park service employee, is well known to many in the group. All enjoyed the exhibits, and several trench nerds dropped some bucks in the well-stocked book store.

On Friday morning, we jumped into Bermuda Hundred with both feet. For those unfamiliar with Virginia's history, a “hundred” was a colonial land grant that awarded land companies a hundred acres for every settler they could transport to the New World. “Bermuda” Hundred was named after a shipwreck in the Caribbean suffered by the earliest inhabitants. Mr. Fickett led us to Point of Rocks, an ancient landmark on the Appomattox River. Posing atop the boulders many felt kinship with those soldiers precariously perched in the familiar photographs from atop Lookout Mountain. Just upriver was the site of one of Butler's pontoon bridges and a



A point of rocks at Point of Rocks

signal tower. Nearby is one of the few antebellum structures that survive in the area today. The one-story house was headquarters for Butler's medical officers. We headed down the steep path to the river where we examined Ashby's Battery, which anchored the far left of Butler's line. This was a fairly massive L-shaped, embrasured work for two twenty-pounder Parrott rifles. The engineers had cleverly used the ground to provide a natural glacis to ward off fire from Confederate gunboats.



Dirt Bike Damage

obliteration, and the site is now a Chesterfield County "pocket park" in a residential neighborhood. Unfortunately, local lads (read, shits) have recently discovered the joy of riding their dirt bikes up and over the parapet, causing rather severe erosion. George appeared crestfallen at the damage. Followed, a discussion on how to dissuade such behavior in which "caltrops" was used.



Damage from Looters

buckle?—struck us as disrespectful to the memory of the Medal of Honor recipient and the soldiers who had camped there.

Onward to Fort Drake, which had served as the main strong point for the center right of the Federal line covering the main road from Bermuda 100 to Chester Court House. Most of the fort itself had long ago been claimed by what is now four-lane Rte. 10, although

Point of Rocks Park is a county recreational area up the road, and it appeared that parking for the tennis courts had gobbled most of the earthworks atop the bluff. We found a few badly eroded remnants of artillery lunettes. We had better luck following a rifle trench that runs around the front of the bluff along the military crest. We hopped back in the vans for a short but confusing ride through subdivisions to Fort Wead, a square redoubt built as a backup position behind the main Federal line. Mr. Fickett was instrumental in saving the fort from

We trudged through a patch of woods south of the fort to the location of the newest county park (about 15 acres) that will preserve several hundred yards of the Federal line. It is named Sgt. Engles Park for a soldier who was awarded the Medal of Honor for his heroism here. En route we passed through what George told us had been an intact Federal camp with hut sites and fire pits. There has now been so much digging and pillaging there by relic hunters that any one of us could have broken a leg in their unfilled holes. Seeing all of that upturned soil—for what, a belt

enough remains to delineate its north flank. South of the highway we found an amazingly pristine four-gun battery. The work was front-ditched with a relief of twelve feet. The guns were mounted en embasure with crisply defined gun ramps leading up to the platforms. Adjacent to three of the guns, the artillerists had dug oblong holes to dismount their limber chests. The best awaited us. In front of the work was a carefully constructed and *extremely* rare glacis, straight out of the textbooks. The fate of this site hangs in balance, but from our observations, it is a gem and deserves protection.



Battery at Fort Drake

North of the highway the line continued with regularly spaced traverses for several hundred yards, wrapping around the front of a crest. Many of the traverses displayed curious hooks at the end that were the subject of much speculation. Unexpectedly, the ground falls away from the trenches into a deep ravine that is mentioned in some of the O.R. accounts. Scaling this almost vertical slope would have been taxing on the best of days, but trying to climb it under fire would have been suicide. Excellent use of terrain. The half-mile distance from the end of this line to James River was defended by several batteries that no longer exist.

We were then on to Battery Dantzler, constructed on the former Howlett farm which gave name to the Confederate defenses that bottled up Butler on the peninsula. Dantzler anchored the Howlett Line on James River, and most of this hefty, sprawling complex for heavy guns survives. A portion is protected as a county park. Positions for two 8-inch Brooks rifles, two Columbiads, a 10" and 8" mortar remain, literally dug into the side of the bluff that drops to the river. Union gunboats coming upriver would have found this battery a very difficult target to hit because of its low profile. Massive magazines for the heavy guns are connected by military roads and covered ways. When Beauregard ordered the temporary abandonment of the Howlett Line on June 15, 1864, the artillerists here had about



Magazines and Bombproofs at Dantzler

four hours' notice. Through unbelievable exertion, they dismounted and buried their heavy guns, later to unearth and remount them after the threat had passed. Considering that a Columbiad weighed about four and a half tons, this was no mean feat. Federal skirmishers occupied the battery next morning and were immediately fired upon by their own gunboats, at which point they raised a white flag. The gunboats eagerly steamed up close and dropped a launch to accept the fort's surrender only to discover that it was their

own troops. This may have been the only place in Civil War history where the U.S. Army surrendered a Confederate fort to the U.S. Navy.

We next stopped at Parker's Battery, a 26-acre unit of the Richmond National Battlefield Park. The only reason that this is part of the national park is that the survivors of this Confederate battery bought up the property after the war as a place to hold their annual reunions. It was donated to the state and then to the park service. Until recently, most of the land that Richmond NBP protects was donated as an afterthought; the park never had authority to go out and buy land on its own. The site, however, is quite special. Here we first encountered the innovative Confederate double-ditch infantry trench that was one of the most modern and efficient rifle trenches constructed during the war (more later). The battery itself was of mundane construction—a position for two guns with two embrasures each. There was much discussion over the function of a series of parallel mounds at the rear of the battery. Were these hut sites? Bomb proofs defined by gabions that long since eroded away? In front of the battery, two parallel communications trenches led east for about two hundred yards across the (postwar) railroad to the entrenched skirmish line. Lowe crept out there (was I really beyond park boundaries?) in 1997 to map this fairly well preserved rifle trench. The trench has now been asphaltized for a truck distribution center. The digital bits of GPS data are all that is left.

When Bobby Lee finally got his army into position to blunt Grant's thrust against Petersburg, Pickett's Division returned to Bermuda 100 and drove Butler's boys back into their "bottleworks" on June 19-20. As part of this offensive, ten or more field guns



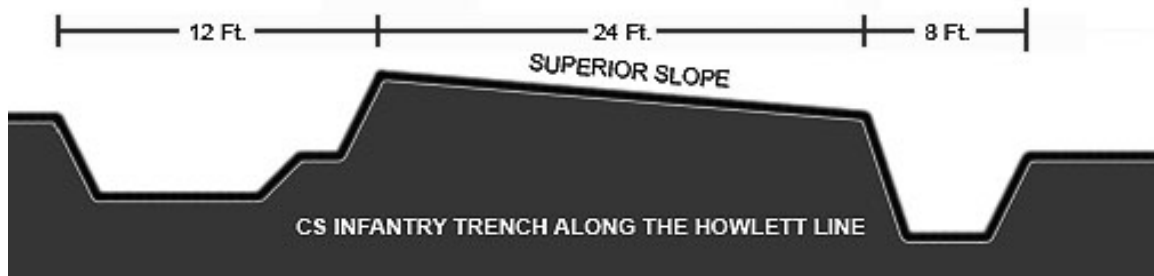
Gun Pit - Ware Bottom Church Battlefield

were pushed forward into no-man's land during the night and entrenched along a farm road. In the morning, curious Federals advancing to see what the noise was all about were met with a wall of canister that sent them packing. These gun entrenchments survive on the last 60-acre undeveloped parcel left of the Ware Bottom Church battlefield. The emplacements are fairly uniform, box-shaped, eight yards on a side, and dug from the inside out. About four of the emplacements were improved, suggesting that these guns were here longer than the others. George asked for help from the

Civil War Preservation Trust to purchase the site—the landowner offered the parcel at half the going rate. The CWPT response was that Bermuda 100 had no constituency—it just wasn't "sexy" enough to raise money for. Granted, it is not the most photogenic battlefield—it is crossed in front of the woods by a parade of high tension wires. But it *is* the last sixty acres. In the opinion of the Trench Nerds," the ten plus artillery emplacements alone are worth the price of admission.

We then moved to the new thirty-acre Howlett Line Park that protects another portion of the Confederate lines. American Battlefield Protection Program chief Paul “The Talon” Hawke went out on a limb to secure funding to purchase the tract through the Land and Water Conservation Program. His skeptical superiors were following the “not sexy enough” rationale but they were wrong. Here the Nerds found the best sex of the whole tour. There she was ... laid out in all her glory ... prone and inviting, leaf covered, dappled with sunlight. So efficiently logical, so immaculately conceived, so WELL BUILT –the most innovative piece of Confederate rapid entrenchment that the group has seen! Where had you been all our lives? Good eye, Mr. Hawke.

The final trace followed by the Howlett Line was established during the fighting at Ware Bottom Church on May 20. Confederates surged forward from the old Stage Road to capture the advanced picket line of the National Army but could get no further, thus the archeology of excavations at this site is likely quite complex. Initially, the line would have consisted of a series of foxholes facing west. After capture by the Graybacks, the line of US holes was likely connected into a continuous rifle trench with an interior ditch facing east. At some point, an enterprising engineer officer came up with an innovative way to improve the rifle trench into a Class Two position. The timing makes it difficult to identify the officer of engineers. Was he on Beauregard’s staff—Col. David B. Harris, perhaps—or a later arrival?



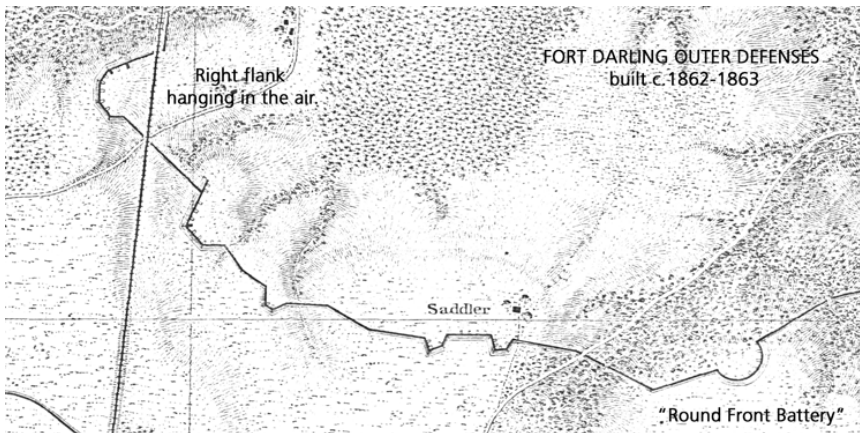
Two lines of diggers were organized about thirty feet apart. The inner line exploited the existing interior ditch, deepening and widening it. The outer line of diggers worked to construct an exterior ditch. Both lines threw their dirt onto the center mound. There is a certain ratio here between the front and rear ditches—the interior ditch had to be wider than the exterior to create the proper angle for the superior slope of the parapet. The superior slope, after all, cannot be perfectly level otherwise a great deal of dead ground results. The superior slope needed to slant at about a 30 degree angle toward the front in order to sweep no-man’s land with fire. Someone thought this problem through and came up with a mathematical solution that was easy to implement. The resulting fortification is a masterpiece. When approaching it from the front, the parapet appears to quietly lift



Grigg, Goss, & E! Presidente discuss Jayhawkers

its head above the natural grade with imagined muskets pointed in our general direction. The profile is deceptively unimposing. After pushing through the obstacles, attackers would confront what appeared to be a simple rifle trench, only to rush forward to discover a seven-foot deep ditch barring the way. Scrambling down and up again, attackers would find themselves crossing an unanticipated twenty-five foot wide parapet in disarray. If driven away from the parapet by the first rush, a line of defenders could stand upon the natural grade behind their earthwork and deliver a devastating volley against those exposed atop the parapet. This form of construction maximized effectiveness while minimizing the labor needed to create it. It is likely that much of the Howlett Line was improved in this manner. Two sections of line survive to tell the story.

Our final stop of the day was toward the southern end of the Confederate line, another county pocket park, protecting a battery along the road and an infantry parapet extending downslope to a debouche used by raiders against the National line. A hefty traverse in a protected ravine near a creek evoked discussion—protection of camps? A bombproof? Protection of artillery horses? Square depressions behind the main line suggested hut



sites. We need the archeologists to answer these questions. The neighbors in this residential neighborhood appeared to appreciate and protect the works in their midst. We witnessed no signs

of abuse, other than a layer of spray paint on one of the interpretive signs. For the most part, these neighbors are protecting their own back yards and consider the fortifications part and parcel.

On Saturday morning, we viewed the defenses of Drewry's Bluff. These consisted of Fort Darling on the James, an inner line, an intermediate line, and an outer line of defenses. We worked from the outside in, starting with the remains of the forts that anchored the Rebel right built in 1863. All of the works along this line that we viewed were (by 1864 standards) grossly overbuilt with ditches 15 feet wide and a relief of up to 18 feet. The outer line ended abruptly on the far side of the Richmond & Petersburg Railroad. On May 13, 1864, Gillmore's troops (X Corps) marched via Chesterfield Court House and came in behind a massive battery that was



A pleased Dr. Phil on the Interior Line

“hanging in the air” forcing out the defenders. We next visited the “round front” battery, a hefty work with 7 gun platforms and a large central traverse/bombproof. We remarked that if the amount of dirt and ditch represented in these works had been spread out horizontally, rather than piled vertically, the Confederate line could have extended all the way to the Court House and would not have been turned by Gilmore. Economy of scale, economy of effort. We next moved to Fort Stephens at Wooldridge Hill on the intermediate line, captured by the National Army on May 14. This is another county pocket park of two acres, the first parcel preserved by the efforts of Trench Biker Fickett, some 15 years ago and a convenient place to picnic.

A good half-mile of the interior line survives. This was a formidable but much more modest endeavor than the exterior lines. A great deal of digging was lavished upon an artillery lunette, a corner demi-bastion, and interior works, but connecting infantry trenches—instead of requiring a firing step—were thrown up high enough for riflemen to shoot over the top of the parapet and no further. This suggests that the engineers were prioritizing their available labor. This suggests that the works were built in late 1863-early 1864 although the documentation is scanty. This parcel of land, perhaps 70 acres, is adjacent to the National Park Service Unit of Drewry’s Bluff, and we could see no reason why this land should not be included in the park. Superintendent Cindy, we respectfully draw attention to this prime earthworks real estate.



View of James River from Ft. Darling

Fort Darling at Drewry’s Bluff provides a beautiful view of James River, the same view that enabled Confederate gunners to prevent US gunboats from reaching Richmond by the water route. In May 1862, newly mounted naval guns in the fort kicked some Yankee butt. Until the end of the war, these fortifications were improved with an eye to river defense. The earthworks have been covered by a layer

of mulch, an experiment in resource protection that seems to have much potential. Under mulch, the earthworks appeared, well, earthen. We could find no signs of incipient erosion—standing applause. Of course, you’ve got to keep on top of the mulch, replenishing on a regular basis, and particularly after heavy rains. Drewry’s Bluff is a Class A tourist destination off I-95. Location, location, location. If you added the interior line of defenses we actually would have a major national park here, not just a



Protective mulch at Ft. Darling. The ideal ground cover??

“unit.”

Next we headed for Fort Brooke on James River, a series linked batteries for very heavy guns—100-pounders. What is fairly unique about this site is the number of period photographs taken of these fortifications. George has the full collection and has been able to match most to the places where they were taken. The photos were very helpful in imagining what the piles of dirt looked like in 1864-1865. So we all walked around pulling “Frassanitos.” Jeff G. had one of those prickly hair moments. “My god,” he said, “I found the camera tripod holes!!”



“Pulling Frassanitos” at Fort Brooke

The guns of Fort Brooke were mounted to take out any Damnyankee gunboats before they made it to Fort Darling and to counter heavy US guns mounted at Federal Fort Stoppard built downriver. By 1864, James River was rendered virtually invincible to US naval incursions by these earthworks. Fort Brooke is at the back end of an industrial park and for the moment is in sympathetic ownership. It’s a long hike which protects it from most of the relic predators. Before and after photographs like this are rare. That makes Fort Brooke a national treasure, one of several that we viewed on this trip.

From Fort Brooke we went to Fort Clifton, Brooke’s counterpart on the Appomattox River. Fort Clifton is a county park devoted more to picnicking and recreation than history. However, Clifton’s surviving earthworks play into the general theme and thus far

have been preserved. I know, it's difficult to imagine that the Trench Nerds could cover this much ground in so short of a time, but we also found a new park that George was not aware of, another one-acre pocket park that a developer thought would enhance the value of his subdivision. This was a simple lunette trace battery that anchored the left flank of the Fort Clifton line on Swift Creek.

We had another half-day in the field, but our observations are classified, likely because we criticized the efforts of Petersburg National Battlefield Park to clear some of their siegeworks of those dreaded evil trees. We viewed five different locations that had been clear-cut and planted in grass. We awarded the park's efforts a C minus—we observed a great deal of post-clearing erosion. The group concluded that tree cover and maintenance is vastly superior for maintaining resource fabric than cutting down trees and planting grass. Too much clearing, too fast. Despite storms, tornadoes, blow-downs, trees are NOT the enemy.

All in all a productive meeting. Special thanks to Fickett and Williams and keep up the good work at Bermuda Hundred.