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~~HISTORIC STRUCTURES REPORT~~

~~PT I~~  
FORTASKELL

IN  
STORAGE

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Petersburg National Battlefield  
Petersburg, Virginia  
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Property of  
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## I Administrative Data

- A. Name of structure - Fort Haskell
- B. Proposed Use - This structure will be a major stop on the self-guided Park
- C. Justification for such use- The restoration of Fort Haskell is recommended as the most efficient means of interpreting a field fortification as it existed during the Petersburg Campaign of 1864-1865. This battlefield has extensive remains of some 28 field works and some thirty miles of fortified lines. Restoration of one of these sites would vitalize a phase of military history that is quite removed from the ordinary visitor's knowledge. One will be able to see how the soldiers besieging the city of Petersburg lived and how they were protected from the storm of fire from the nearby Confederate positions. Since both sides used similiar works this restoration will also serve to show how their counterparts were able to hold so many miles of siege line for so long a time with so few men. The difficulty in attacking such a position as Fort Haskell and the reason why one defender in such a work could be equal to three of an assault force can easily be seen when this complicated defensive system is before the visitor. No painting or model would have the same interpretive value as an actual reconstruction. Fort Haskell was chosen for its historic importance as a vital part in the repulse of the Confederate attack against the Union lines

at Fort Stedman on March 25, 1865 and because of its ideal location in regards to visitor accessibility, protection, and maintenance. Due to its present pronounced and extensive remains, most, if not all, of the required earth could be acquired from the immediate vicinity. Much of this earth would already be at the site itself.

- D. Provisions for operating the structure - The proposed one-way Park tour through the Petersburg battlefields will be our major visitor attraction. The reconstructed Fort Haskell will be a vital part of this tour and can be expected to be a major stop. The trail through this exhibit in place will be a self-guided one with markers and exhibits to interpret the area to the visitor. If future conditions warrant, interpretive personnel could be stationed at the site during peak visiting times. It is believed, however, that the self-guided tour will adequately provide the information sought by the average visitor.
- E. Brief description of proposed construction activity - The major construction activity will be the reconstruction or restoration of the parapets, magazines, bombproofs, gun-platforms and the traverse. Concrete replicas of the gabions, fascines, sand-bags, fraise, doors should be used to save maintenance funds after the restoration is completed. The excavation of the surrounding ditches and trenches will provide much of the earth fill for the parapets.

F. Preliminary estimate of cost - The total estimate of the cost of this restoration from P. C. P. M-31-A would be \$57,000. Broken down this would include \$44,200 for construction, \$6,420 for plans, surveys, and supervision, \$2,680 for contingencies, and \$3,700 for archeological investigation

G. Photograph of existing condition

North or Right Parapet

Remains of Bombproof

Probable Remains of Magazine

## II Historical Data

### A. Brief resume of knowledge of the structure

The area just east of Petersburg, Virginia is in a transition zone between the Piedmont and Tidewater Virginia. Gently rolling hills with low relief alternate with broad level valleys. Until the spring and summer of 1864, the low ridge upon which the Union main line was to be constructed had a very nondescript historical past. During the Revolutionary War British troops, marching toward Petersburg and then back toward Yorktown, passed close-by. The immediate area has generally been farmland or second-growth woodland.

During the spring and summer of 1862, while General McClellan was being repulsed in his attempt to take Richmond, Confederate authorities had designed and constructed a series of earthen fortifications which were to encircle Petersburg on three sides. This line was located about one mile to the east of the final Confederate position and was to provide the initial defense for the city in 1864. After the battle of Cold Harbor on June 3, 1864, Grant began to move his ponderous army south of the James River in an attempt to take Petersburg, the major transportation hub of Southside Virginia.

The battle for Petersburg began in earnest on June 15, 1864 when General Smith's XVII Corps, Army of the James, successfully assaulted the Confederate position at Battery Five. Although

badly outnumbered and fighting behind hastily dug entrenchments, General Beauregard, the Confederate commander at Petersburg held his lines until the night of June 17. Knowing he could not maintain his position much longer Beauregard fell back to a line along Poor Creek, just east of the town. During the 18th, the Union forces assaulted this position but were unable to break through. The crest of the ridge between Harrison Creek and Poor Creek was taken, however, and here the Union main line was to form. The two opposing lines in this vicinity were extremely close, with the picket lines within easy talking distance of each other. Although begun immediately after the 18th, the Union line was never actually finished. Constant changes and alterations were made during the siege. In early September, 1864, an inspection of Redoubt Number 3, which was soon renamed Fort Haskell, showed that it was largely incapable of defense. The rear parapet was only about two feet high, while the front parapet was almost seven feet high and not equipped with banquettes. The superior slope was horizontal and provided no field of fire. Needless to say, immediate directives were sent out to correct this dangerous situation. Magazines were built later in September and the barbette gun positions were constructed in November.

Although there was constant small arm fire and artillery duels took place almost every day, no major assaults were made



from or against Fort Haskell until very late in the siege. Federal artillery along this ridge was directed against Confederate batteries in an attempt to support the abortive Union attack against the Crater on July 30, 1864 and, late in the evening, on November 5, 1864, a minor Confederate attack captured a portion of the Union picket line directly in front of Haskell. According to General Gibbon, commanding Second Division, Second Corps, the unit manning the line, this section of the picket had been poorly constructed and located across a pond from the Union main line and its loss was not serious. No attempt to regain this lost section was made.

Fort Haskell's great day in history came on March 25, 1865 when it was heavily involved in the fighting around Fort Stedman, a short distance to the North. Early in the morning, General John B. Gordon's Confederate division, along with detachments from other units, hit the main Union line by surprise and captured a portion of the line on both sides of Fort Stedman. From this area, they began to fan out to the north and south. With a major Confederate breakthrough at this location, severe fighting centered around Fort Haskell, the next major fortification to the South. Here, units of the Third Brigade, General O. B. Willcox's division, IX Army Corps managed to halt the crumbling Union line. As soon as it was light enough, the Confederates

opened up on the fort with the captured guns at Fort Stedman as well as the guns on their own main line. This, coupled with murderous musketry fire, made hot work for the undermanned garrison. The fort was finally surrounded and shrouded in heavy smoke. This led some of the Union reserve batteries on a near-by ridge to believe Haskell had fallen and they began to shell the area. When this fire became uncomfortable, a volunteer color guard crossed on the railings of the bridge over the moat (the floor planks having been removed) to wave the fort's colors in the face of the attacking Confederates. This heroic deed gave notice to the Union batteries that the fort still held out and the Union shelling stopped.

By this time, Confederate columns from Fort Stedman had been halted in their movement along all fronts. Flanking fire from Fort McGilvery to the north and Fort Haskell to the south had forced the enemy into the captured bomb-proofs and consequently the Confederates could not properly reform their lines and sweep on toward Meade's Station, a major Union supply depot.

By 8:00 A.M. the Confederate drive was dead and now retreat was ordered by Gordon. Fort Haskell played an important part in this action also. The only way to retreat was across the same ground used for the initial attack in front of Stedman, and just as they had in the rear area the guns at Forts McGilvery and Haskell covered this field. Confederate artillery fire was

directed at Fort Haskell and a desperate Confederate attack to silence the Haskell guns was beaten off. These guns, especially at Haskell, were instrumental in the heavy Confederate losses.

This had been Haskell's great moment and afterward, life returned to the boredom and misery of prolonged trench life. On April 2 after learning of the timely Union victory at Five Forks, Grant applied pressure all along his front, but the Confederate works, in the Fort Haskell area still proved too strong for a successful attack. To the west, however, the Union soldiers were more fortunate, and Lee's line cracked. That night, the Army of Northern Virginia evacuated the city and on the 3rd of April, Fort Haskell was left behind along with the remainder of the lines as the Army of the Potomac moved westward in pursuit of Lee.

#### B. Builder

The fortification was built and repaired by detachments from the various units in the vicinity, mostly the Second and Ninth Corps. Supervision was under Major Nathaniel Michler, Corps of Engineers and Major James C. Ruane, Chief Engineer, Army of the Potomac. The immediate supervisor was Captain G. L. Gillespie, U. S. Engineers.

### III Architectural Data

A. Design - The fortification is four-sided, entirely enclosed

except for a small opening in the gorge, or rear wall. To protect this opening, a traverse was constructed parallel to the rear parapet but slightly inside. The structure is a simple earthen fort, built for protection and not designed for its artistic value.

- B. Material - Principal construction material was earth, with wood logs and planks used for the gun platforms, revetments, and obstructions.
- C. Existing structure - Although the existing earthworks are in very good condition, much of the restoration data will come from the Army Engineers plan and archeological research. One may readily see the outlines of the various inner works such as magazines, bombproofs and barbettes. Comparison of the actual remains on the field and the plan of the fort indicate that additions to the fort were made after the plans were drawn up. Several barbette positions were constructed and one large magazine or bombproof was built. There are several small depressions which could be the remains of small splinterproofs or might be holes left by relic-hunters. Archeological research will be needed to determine this.

The remaining parapets are approximately three and one-half feet to five feet above the parade. The moat, for the most part is in good condition and averages three feet below the normal ground level. The protecting traverse is about two and one-half feet. There are no remains of any of the banquettes

which are indicated on the plan, but these fixtures were necessarily built.

The past century has taken a heavy toll on the fort's interior. The magazines and bombproofs have all caved in, but can be readily discernible. Embrasures and barbets are well worn but also readily recognizable. At the southwest corner of the fortification, an earth ramp has been built across the moat and through the parapet. This has destroyed the continuity of both of these parts and must be corrected. Although it is highly improbable that this ramp was built during the war, archeological research will be needed to verify this supposition. With a combination of historical and archeological research, the fort can be reconstructed as it stood.

#### IV Archeological Data

##### A - Archeological data

The plan of the fort from the Army Engineers indicates, with a cross-section, the magazines and bombproofs. Research is needed to determine if these dimensions were used on the actual construction. Several small areas within the fort need research to determine whether they are splinterproofs of Civil War origin or disturbances of later date, possibly from relic hunters.

After the reconstruction has been completed, the original earthworks will either have been obliterated or covered over. Therefore a complete archeological cross-section should be done first. This would locate any original material still in existence. Research on the various barbettes and banquette areas could indicate if these structures were covered, or faced, with planks. It is probable, but not known, that gunplatforms were used on the barbettes. Research could prove <sup>whether or not</sup> this was actually the case.

B - Cost and time required - This section should be referred to a specialized Historic Survey archaeologist for accurate determination of cost and time requirements.

#### V Furnishing and Exhibition data

Plans for furnishing the various structures within the fort and for exhibiting the area have not been finalized. One of two plans will be followed in this area.

The bombproofs and magazines could be open to the public as walk-in or walk-through exhibits. This would entail some guess-work unless better sources turn up as to how these areas looked. A second plan would be to use only the exterior of these structures. This would eliminate any possible error in furnishing the interior but could leave much to be desired

from the visitor's standpoint. As to the exterior furnishings, appropriate artillery pieces will be placed in the fort and all wooden facings and platforms will be installed, most likely in concrete.

The visitor to Fort Haskell will have a self-guided tour to familiarize himself with the area. Various signs, plaques, and probably paintings will interpret Fort Haskell. Unless visitation and public reaction warrants, this will be an unmanned exhibit in place.