

David F. Riggs

Continuing Jamestown's Military Tradition

The Civil War Years

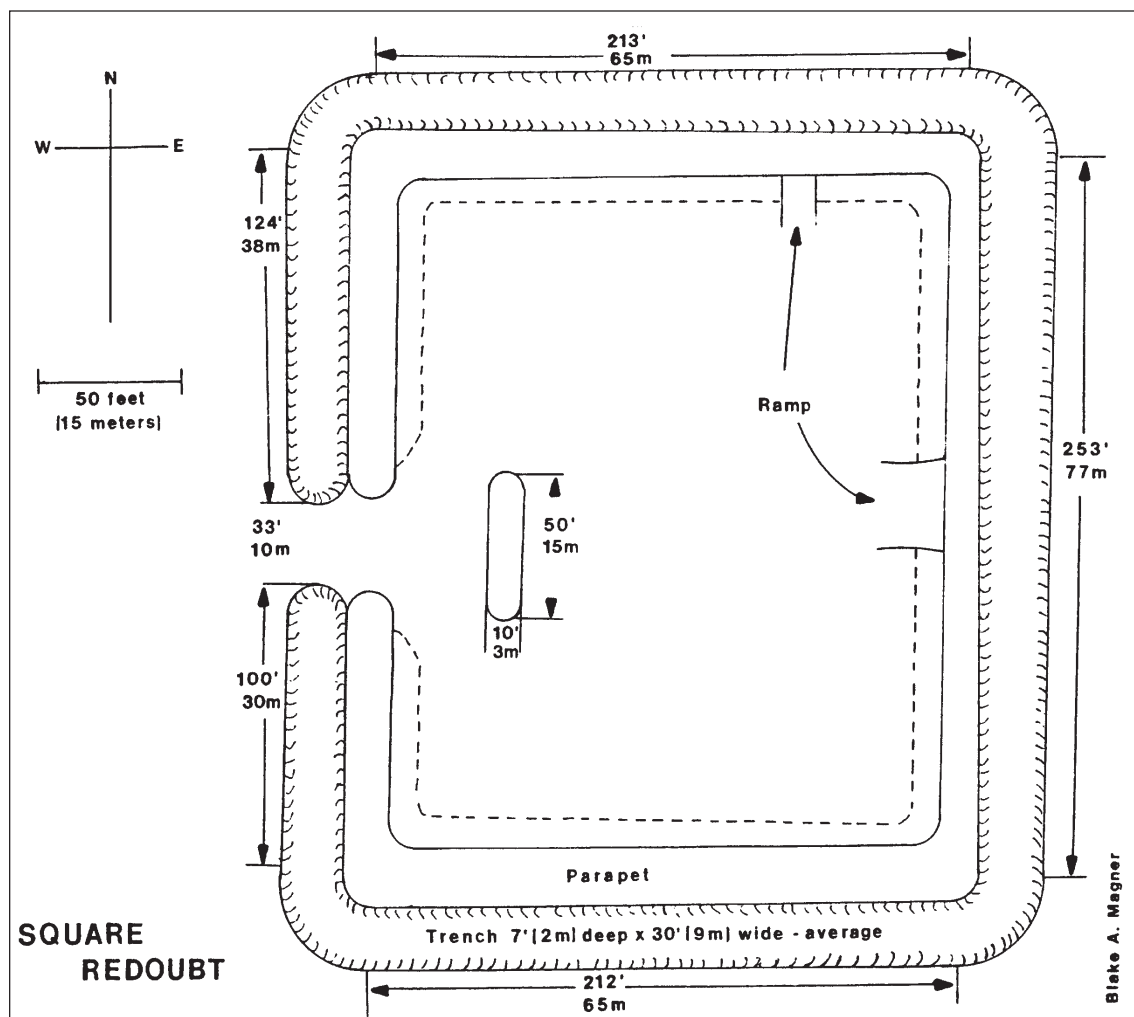
Jamestown's strategic location was important to English colonists in 1607, and there was renewed military interest in the island during the American Civil War. In 1861 Confederates initially regarded it as the best defensive point along the James River for defending Richmond, the South's capital and industrial center.

William Allen was a wealthy Virginian whose properties included Jamestown. He occupied the island that April with troops he raised at his own expense. Allen soon was joined by Catesby ap Roger Jones, a naval lieutenant, who was directed to construct and command artillery batteries. Before the year ended, Jamestown had five earth-

works that controlled river traffic and protected the island. During the summer two infantry units boosted Confederate strength to its maximum of more than 1,200 men. Additional fortifications soon were erected below Jamestown and many of these troops were transferred to them. As the island's military might declined, Jones conducted vital ordnance and armor tests for the CSS *Virginia* (formerly *Merrimack*) prior to his November reassignment to Richmond.

Jones's successor was Maj. John R. C. Coxe, who was joined by local militia. Allen bolstered Jamestown's dwindling numbers during spring 1862 by raising an artillery battalion. When Maj. Gen. George B. McClellan launched his Peninsula

Drawing courtesy
Blake A. Magner.



*Ft. Pocahontas.
Photo by the
author.*



campaign and besieged Yorktown in April, the Confederates responded by evacuating the middle Virginia Peninsula, including Jamestown, on the night of May 3. With Jamestown safely behind Union lines, the large Federal transport fleet anchored there throughout the summer. Telegraph wires were run from Jamestown to Fort Monroe, which was connected to Washington, thereby improving communications between McClellan and the War Department. After McClellan's withdrawal from the Peninsula in late August, the navy continued to patrol the river.

While under Federal occupation, Jamestown was a rendezvous point for escaped slaves, many of whom were evacuated by the navy. When the army vacated the island, William Allen's slaves burned the 18th-century mansion there, known as the Ambler house. That October, Allen had five men visit Jamestown to assess its condition, and three were killed by the rebellious blacks.

Jamestown was virtually ignored until 1863 when it became part of a Confederate diversionary movement during the Suffolk campaign. It played a comparable role for Federals in their feint against Richmond during the Gettysburg campaign.

In August 1863, Jamestown assumed a new role as an army outpost for Williamsburg, which was the most advanced Union position along the Peninsula. Companies from all service branches and U. S. Colored Troops were rotated to observe the river and Confederate guerrillas. The pace livened during the Bermuda Hundred campaign when the telegraph was reinstalled. The Petersburg campaign required improvements in June 1864. Accordingly, Lt. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant extended telegraph communications with a mile-long under-

water cable from Jamestown to Swann's Point and then ran wires to Fort Powhatan which was linked to his headquarters at City Point. When guerrillas cut wires, Grant thwarted them by running an underwater cable 22 miles from Jamestown to Fort Powhatan. As the Petersburg campaign wore into the autumn and winter months, Union troops whose terms of enlistment had expired were sent to Jamestown to guard the island and await transportation north. Guerrilla activity occasionally rup-

tured the tranquillity early in 1865. After Gen. Robert E. Lee's army surrendered at Appomattox, Jamestown was a location for administering the Oath of Allegiance to former Confederates.

Today most of the sites associated with the Civil War have blended into the natural and colonial landscape. The 18th-century Ambler house that serviced Confederate officers was rebuilt but burned again three decades later. Its ruins stand in New Towne. Only the wooden T-shaped outline remains from the busy wharf that received Southern supplies, and the bridge that connected the island to the mainland has totally vanished.

Of the five Confederate earthworks on Jamestown Island, only two are substantially intact and accessible to visitors. Fort Pocahontas, which stands adjacent to the 17th-century church tower, was the first and most significant one for defending Richmond during the early months of the war. Toward the center of the island is the Square Redoubt. Located along the modern auto tour, it once guarded the military road and protected Jamestown's interior against boat attack via Passmore Creek, just opposite the fort. Earthworks near Goose Hill and Black Point were erected to strengthen the river defenses, while a fifth one guarded the bridge and was supported by an infantry lunette. These latter fortifications no longer are extant or are hidden by marshy terrain, much as Jamestown's Civil War history has been overshadowed by the dynamic role it played in founding a nation.

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