

Battle of Fort Harrison

Richmond National Battlefield Park

Fort Harrison was key to General Butler's plan of attack. It represented the strongest point on the Confederate line of defenses. From it, one could see all the way to the James River. However, in 1864 most of the Confederate forces were in Petersburg and here the Confederate defenders numbered barely 200. Their guns were mostly so poor as to be scorned by the main field artillery. The Union attack pierced the fort quickly, with relatively few casualties. Had the Union attacks on the rest of the Confederate line succeeded as well as at New Market Heights and Fort Harrison, the overall military significance would have been greater.

On September 30, Robert E. Lee personally organized a major effort to recapture the lost fort. His attack also lacked coordination, and the well prepared Union defenders—some of them armed with multiple-shot weapons—crushed the Confederate effort and inflicted great loss on the attackers. The victors abolished the Confederate title for the fort and renamed it Fort Burnham after the Union general killed in the attack of September 29.

TOURING THE FORT

STOP 1

You are facing the side gate of Union Fort Burnham. The short wall to your left and the portion of the earthworks visible immediately to your right were added by the Federal defenders after their capture of Fort Harrison. These walls protected the defenders in the event of a Confederate attack, and shielded them from a daily harrasing fire delivered by Confederate guns north of here.

STOP 2

Stay on the path to the left as you enter the fort. These earthworks make up the primary wall of Confederate Fort Harrison and are an extension of the exterior line of Richmond defenses. The height of this wall was 18-27 feet, and up to 15 feet wide. Beyond the wall is a deep ditch that discouraged attacks.

STOP 3

The freestanding wall on your right is a traverse. It was built by Federal defenders as an inner wall to deflect artillery shells fired from Fort Johnson and Fort Gilmer to the north.

STOP 4

The rectangular space in front of you was one of three Confederate artillery positions inside the fort. The other sections are not clearly visible because of alterations made by Union troops after the battle. On September 29, Federal troops first entered the fort over the wall on your left. This section was considerably weakened when two large artillery pieces became inoperable. The solid mass of earth to the right was called the Great Traverse, and was constructed by Confederate engineers as protection from artillery shells fired from Union gunboats on the James River.

STOP 5

To your right is another traverse, the largest in the fort. To your left, beside the Great Traverse, is the trace of an original roadway that was constructed after the battle to provide Union troops with full access to the fort. In this vicinity on September 29, General Grant narrowly escaped death when a Confederate shell exploded nearby, showering him with dirt.

STOP 6

This marks the abrupt end of Fort Harrison. The remaining walls to your right and front were built by Union troops as part of Fort Burnham. The Confederate walls are more substantial because the builders had two years in which to improve the position, while the Union walls were created in a few days with hostile Confederates in sight.

STOP 7

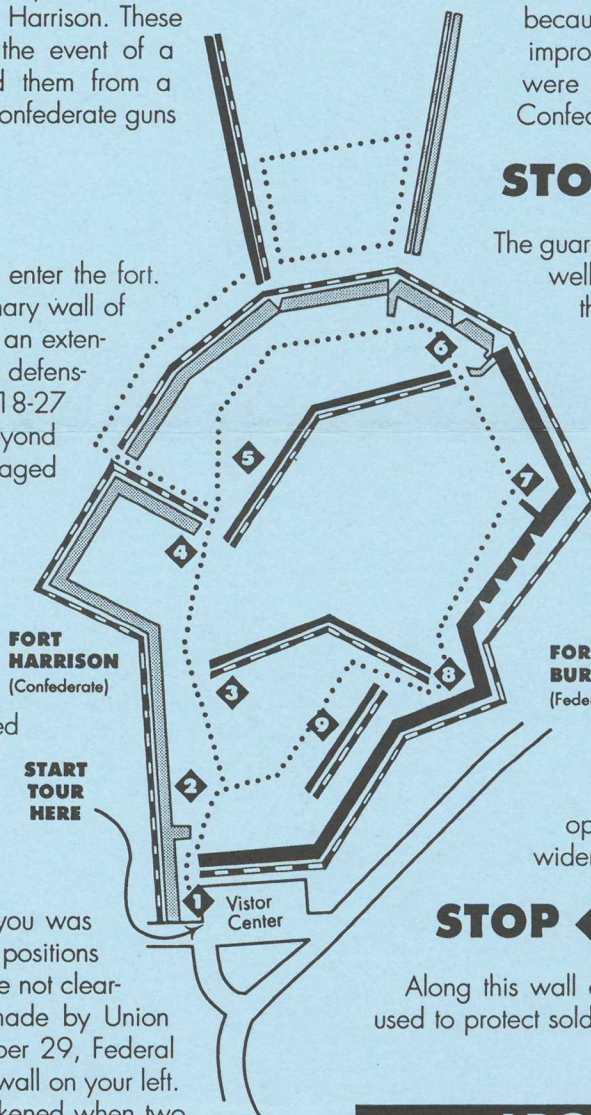
The guard rail encloses the location of a fresh water well, dug by Confederates and retained by the Federals after the battle. Union troops feared that the Confederates knew the location of the well, and they built a small traverse beside it as protection from Confederate artillery fire.

STOP 8

To the left is an emplacement for artillery called a barbette, built by Federal troops after the fighting. An artillery piece could be rolled up the ramp into position near the angle in the fort wall with its barrel projecting over the top of the wall. This provided little protection for the crewmen operating the piece, but gave the gun a wider angle of fire.

STOP 9

Along this wall are the remnants of Federal bombproofs, used to protect soldiers from shells and stray bullets.



ABOUT YOUR VISIT

Fort Harrison Battlefield is a unit of Richmond National Battlefield Park and is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. Headquarters for the park is located at Chimborazo Visitor Center, 3215 East Broad Street, Richmond, VA. The Visitor Center is open daily except Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Year's Day and contains a museum, movie, maps and other literature. Park Service Staff are on duty to answer your questions and to help you in planning a visit to the battlefields. For further information on this and other units of the park, write: Superintendent Richmond National Battlefield Park, 3215 East Broad Street, Richmond, VA 23223. Or call us at 804-226-1981.

Military Operations at Chaffin's Farm

The nature of warfare evolved dramatically during the final ten months of the war. Static war in the trenches replaced the freewheeling mass movements of earlier campaigns. This began at Cold Harbor in June 1864 and progressed southward to the series of battles around Petersburg. These affairs occasionally erupted in full-scale battles. The Battle of Chaffin's Farm is a particularly illustrative example of a late-war engagement.

From the very beginning of the war, Confederate engineers worked feverishly to build permanent defenses around Richmond. By 1864, they had created a system anchored south of the capital on the James River at Chaffin's Farm, a large open bluff named for a local resident. This outer line was supported by an intermediate and inner system of fortifications much closer to the capital.

The strength of these lines remained untested until September 1864 when Union General Ulysses S. Grant tried to capture Richmond or Petersburg by attacking simultaneously north and south of the James. The attack north of the river occurred on September 29. Federal general Benjamin Butler commanded the attackers who captured the strategically important New Market Heights in the early morning. Other elements of Butler's forces then overwhelmed the Confederate defenders inside Fort Harrison. However, uncoordinated attacks against Forts Gilmer, Gregg and Johnson all encountered dismal failure, leaving Butler and Grant chagrined at only partial success. A Confederate counterattack on September 30 proved equally futile, and the two armies settled into trench warfare that continued until the end of the war. This fighting around Chaffin's Farm cost the nation nearly 5,000 casualties.

During the fighting on September 29, 1864, **Fort Gilmer** played a prominent role in the repulse of the Federal drive north toward Richmond. African-American soldiers from the 9th United States Colored Troops participated in the attack, but were annihilated by the Virginians and Georgians defending the fort. This fort was named after Jeremy F. Gilmer, one of the leading engineers in the Confederacy.

The Union efforts to break the Confederate line north of Fort Harrison began at **Fort Johnson** and spread northward to Forts Gregg and Gilmer. Inexperienced troops from Pennsylvania and New York advanced from the east across ground that was open at that time. After suffering appalling casualties, a few men reached the ditch in front of the fort where they were eventually captured. This fort is probably named after Confederate Major General Bushrod R. Johnson of Tennessee.

Fort Hoke marks the deepest penetration of the Union attack south of Fort Harrison. Late on September 29, Federal troops captured the fort, only to abandon it shortly afterward while consolidating their position around Fort Harrison. This site became a crucial stronghold in the new Confederate line developed after the battle that connected Fort Hoke to Fort Johnson. It is named for Confederate Major General Robert F. Hoke of North Carolina.

Battery Alexander was built after the September 1864 fighting in order to protect the approaches to Richmond along the nearby New Market Road (modern Route 5). Confederate General E. Porter Alexander designed the line and supervised its construction, and this site bears his name.

On September 29, United States Colored Troops attacked **Fort Gregg** along Mill Road. Later, Union soldiers from Pennsylvania and New York swept forward to the walls of the fort, only to be shredded by the defenders. This fort was named after the commander of the famous Texas Brigade, General John Gregg, who played a key role in the Battle of Chaffin's Farm and later died defending the approaches to Richmond on October 7, 1864.

Fort Harrison (Fort Burnham)

Named for Confederate engineer Lieutenant William Harrison. On September 29, 1864, roughly 2,500 Union infantry stormed and captured the fort. **Fort Harrison** was the only major Confederate fortification captured during the attack.

Built along the Kingsland Road, **Battery IV** is a Union fortification constructed after the battles of September, 1864. It was one of four batteries connecting Fort Harrison (renamed Fort Burnham by that time) with Fort Brady to the south, and was designed for 200 defenders and up to eight guns.

Fort Brady, a well-preserved fortification on the James River, was built by Union engineers after the battles of late September, 1864. It kept Confederate gunboats bottled up to the north, and anchored the Union line that extended to Fort Harrison and beyond. There is a short walking trail inside the fort with signs.

