

Old Soldiers Return to West Point

In April 1891, four comrades who had fought in the 127th New York Volunteer Infantry between 1862 and 1865, and had occupied West Point in the spring of 1863, visited scenes of their Civil War service in Tidewater Virginia. They were James W. Eldridge, John H. Colgate, William W. Hulse, and Charles H. Wessells, who left a written account of the trip in a long letter to Franklin McGrath. McGrath appended this letter to his unit history of the 127th regiment, published as The History of the 127th New York Volunteers, "Monitors," in the War for the Preservation of the Union—September 8th, 1862, June 30th, 1865, in 1898.

The following excerpt describes their visit to West Point.

A year later (April 1891), the same party, reinforced by Eldridge, boarded the Old Dominion steamer "City of Atlanta," Captain Jennie, bound for the scenes of our peninsula campaign. Our original intention had been to leave the steamer at Yorktown, but profiting by the advice of the pilot, who boarded the vessel some distance below that point, the programme was changed, and we continued on to West Point. Our pilot, who was quite a character in his way, had at one time served the Confederacy as a blockade runner and later had been in the Union service. Knowing of our intention to visit Yorktown he volunteered to see that we should be properly entertained, and we found him as good as his word, and waiting for us on our arrival there, the second day after. The sail past Yorktown and up the York River brought vividly back to our memory our first visit to the historic spot w[h]ere Washington lost his British citizenship and Cornwallis his sword. Darkness closed round us before West Point was reached, but the glare of electric lights revealed enough to show a village of some magnitude, where (if our memory is correct) but a solitary house stood when we evacuated the point in the spring of 1863. As we approached the dock our attention was attracted to the sound of running water, and in answer to our inquiries we learned that it was the discharge from an artesian well, and that most of the fifty or more dwellings were supplied with such conveniences. A peculiar feature of these wells, which it was necessary to sink but a slight depth, was, that the pressure of the water on the river bottom when the tide was high added very materially to the force of the flow, and from the pipe on the pier there was a steady stream emptying itself into the river.

West Point owes its growth and development to its being one of the termini of the Richmond & Danville Railroad system, which penetrates the cotton and mineral section of the South, heavy shipments of its product being made from this point.

Armed with a letter of introduction we hunted up Mr. Lamb, the agent of the Old Dominion Line of Steamers, who was also agent of the Richmond & Danville Railroad, and to whose courtesy we were indebted for our ability to stop off at Whitehouse Landing without being compelled to spend the entire day there, and for our comfort later at Williamsburgh [*sic*].

Mr. Lamb kindly accompanied us in a stroll through the village and opened his house for our reception, though his family was absent in Williamsburgh. We returned and spent the night on the steamer and started about sunrise to visit the spot where we had fortified across the point, nearly from the Pamunkey to the Mattaponi [*sic*], but with no

idea that we should find a portion at least of the works in a condition really better than we had left them. A walk of about two miles brought us to the rifle pits, or breastworks, over which a beautiful sward had grown and preserved in nearly their original shape, while at the foot of the terrace or slope in front was growing a line of symmetrical pine trees, with trunks from ten to twelve inches in diameter, that had the appearance of having been carefully planted. Our theory was that they had grown from seed that had been washed by the rain to the foot of the slope, and had, in that way, received their perfect alignment. Very little of the original shape of the works which had been dubbed "Fort Scales" remained, and a diligent search for buried treasure (our unpopular epaulettes, the mysterious disappearance of which at this point had led to such a christening) resulted in failure, and our relic hunter was forced to content himself with carrying away some of the soil he or some comrade had perchance turned over with an army spade many years before. Some of the railroad ties which had been used as a platform for the gun carriages were still visible, but here, even more than was the case at Fort Marcy, some knowledge of fortifications would be necessary to enable the observer to understand the original object of the structure.

On our return walk we were shown the solitary house referred to as standing when we left the spot in 1863, which the residents told us stood during the war of 1776, when it was used as a tavern (*McGrath 174–76*).

Transcribed by William A. Palmer, Jr.