

ECHOES

The War at Richmond

By Verne Cole

The trees are everywhere. They grow on and around the bunkers so easily visible from the road. The soldiers didn't call them bunkers when they dug out the earth and piled it up in the spring of 1862. They called them forts or breastworks. Or maybe unprintable names. It was hard, physical labor trying to construct a defense for Richmond, Virginia, the capital of the Confederacy.

Here, as visitors last month, we walked through the forest to the mounds of earth which supported the growth of a number of trees. My mind's eye could see those soldiers of 133 years ago, some of them shirtless in the warmth of a Virginia Spring, swatting mosquitoes, swinging picks and hurling shovelsful of earth up the slope, building the steep banks designed to protect them from an assault by the dreaded Yankees. I imagined some of them as slaves, hardened to heavy work, digging, chopping and piling the earth steadily hour after hour.

As I stood between the trees, I knew that not one of the thousands of men who worked on this construction program had one slight thought that so many years later some of their efforts would be visible -- despite the effects of weathering -- and remembered.

Men shot at each other from these bunkers. They shouted, cursed and prayed. And they feared -- not only for their own lives, but for their families, their way of life. This was their home and they would defend it. Some were killed outright and many were wounded. Their blood and that of the some of the attackers had soaked the earth I now walked on.

Those fortifications nearly circled Richmond when the city was preparing itself for an assault from Federal General George B. McClellan's 100,000 well-trained troops. Richmond, in 1860, had a population of about 40,000, but in 1862 the population had about doubled with refugees from further north and east in Virginia.

There were two main lines, the first was roughly 10 miles away from the city and stretched more than 65 miles. The second, or inner, line was about four



miles from the city. Inside this line at the edge of the city were a series of forts.

In early March, General Joseph E. Johnston became fearful that his 42,000 troops would be no

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Luncheon Meeting Dec. 1

Because the normal date for a meeting of the San Joaquin Valley Civil War Round Table would be Thanksgiving weekend, the meeting has been postponed to Dec. 1, when a luncheon will be held, beginning at 11:30 a.m. in the Downtown Club, 2120 Kern Street.

This will be the last meeting of the year, and will be devoted to introspection and a discussion of plans for the new year. Luncheon checks (\$10) as reservations should be made out to the SJVCWRT and mailed to: Civil War Round Table, P.O. Box 5695, Fresno, CA. 93755.

Elected as officers for 1996 at the last meeting were: Bill Head, president; Barbara Moats, vice president; Wayne Bowen, treasurer; Carol Berry, secretary; Verne Cole, newsletter editor; Linda Clague, membership secretary; Tim Johnson, publicity and Rick Kubiak as historian. Both John Taylor and Charles Jorgensen, as past presidents, also will be members of the board of directors.

Richmond (Continued)

match for McClellan's army, when the expected Spring offensive was launched. He quickly evacuated Manassas, where the Confederates had scored their remarkable victory the previous July, and headed south to the Rappahannock River. McClellan, though had believed that Johnston's army numbered 150,000 men. He asked for reinforcements.

This was early spring, there were heavy rains, the roads were muddy and the Confederates literally burned their bridges behind them. McClellan decided not to pursue, but to launch a major amphibious assault on the Virginia Peninsula, that narrow strip of land between the York and James Rivers which empty into Chesapeake Bay and the Atlantic Ocean. Richmond lies on the James River about 70 miles upstream.

In the nine months since Manassas, McClellan had built a remarkable, well-trained army, which now found itself disembarking from ships at Fort Monroe, the seemingly impregnable Union fort that guarded the entrance to Hampton Roads. More than 121,000 men were transported on nearly 400 ships shuttling back and forth.

The Confederate army made a show of defending Yorktown, rebuilding the earthwork defenses Cornwallis had constructed during the Revolutionary War,

and rushing in reinforcements. After three weeks of work, the Federal army was finally ready for an assault. Johnston, who apparently had a superior intelligence team, evacuated the fortifications and marched up the Peninsula to Williamsburg.

There, the Confederate army attempted a rear-guard action to defend the massive supply train headed toward Richmond. And there, the Union army gained an important victory, chasing the Confederate army back toward the Capitol. Although the Federal army suffered 2,239 casualties, including 456 dead, there were 1,603 Confederates killed.

On May 6, President Lincoln arrived at Fort Monroe and ordered Major General John E. Wool to cross the river and take Norfolk. Now, the Union navy seemed free to move upriver and bombard Richmond.

McClellan, though, moved his troops up the Peninsula at a snail's pace. At the same time, the *Virginia*, the Confederate ship Union knew as the *Merrimac*, now had no home port and no way to get into Chesapeake Bay because of the Union forts on both sides. The *Virginia* was abandoned and then blown up.

The citizens of Richmond were terrified. The Virginia Legislature voted to burn the city rather than see it occupied by the Union army. The work on the city's fortifications continued at a feverish pace.

Eight miles from Richmond, at a place called Dreyer's Bluff, the Confederates sank old ships and stone filled cribs across the James River to halt the Union ships and mounted heavy artillery and a line of sharpshooters on both shores. This defense worked, and the Federal navy withdrew.

McClellan stretched his lines from the east to the northwest of Richmond, but because of swamps and flooded small rivers a number of units were isolated from the rest of the army. Johnston, who was almost as cautious about beginning a battle as was McClellan, finally, on May 31, ordered General James Longstreet to assault the Union troops at White Oak Swamp, Fair Oaks and Seven Pines. Here, the Federals were outnumbered almost two to one.

This battle actually was a series of battles covering a wide area, and the first day's fighting, costly to both sides, ended in a stalemate. There were 6,134 Confederate casualties, including 980 dead; the Federals had 5,031 casualties, 790 of them dead. Johnston

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The San Joaquin Valley Civil War Round Table officers for 1995 are:



President John Taylor
Vice President Bill Head
Secretary Barbara Moats
Treasurer Wayne Bowen.

Other board members are Linda Clague, Tim Johnson, Verne Cole, newsletter editor; Rick Kubiak, historian; and the immediate past president, Charles Jørgensen.

Change of address?
Call Verne Cole, 435-8410
or Wayne Bowen, 291-4885.

Thomas Starr King

By Carol Berry

Ask a Californian if he or she knows who Thomas Starr King is, and chances are the reply will be "Who?" Yet Thomas Starr King was held in such regard by the State of California that he was chosen to represent the state, along with Father Junipero Serra, in Statuary Hall at the U. S. Capitol Building.

Thomas Starr King was born in New York City in 1824 to Susan Starr and Rev. Thomas Farrington King, a Universalist minister. At the age of 16, Starr King began a career as a teacher in the Boston area; at 22, he was *ordained a minister*. Two years later he married Julia Wiggin of East Boston.

Starr King moved to San Francisco in the spring of 1860 to fill the ministerial post at the First Unitarian Church. His eloquence and charisma swelled the church's ranks and endeared him to the people of San Francisco. At the outbreak of the Civil War, he became a major spokesman for the Union and his speeches "swayed the multitudes."

He spoke of Jefferson Davis in one address: "He is a representation to my soul of a force of evil. His cause is pollution and a horror. His banner is a black flag. I could pray for him as one man; a brother man, in his private, affectional, and spiritual relations to heaven. But as President of the seceding States, head of brigand forces, organic representative of the powers of destruction within our country,-- pray for him!-- as soon for Antichrist! Never!"

Thomas Starr King organized the Pacific Coast Sanitary Commission, an affiliation of the U. S. Sanitary Commission, and was instrumental in raising funds for that organization. His efforts were such that California's total contribution to the U. S. Sanitary Commission amounted to more than one-fourth of all the money donated countrywide.

On March 4, 1864, at the age of 39, Thomas Starr King succumbed to diphtheria. Flags were flown at half staff throughout California; the state Legislature and courts adjourned for the day in tribute. And at the unveiling of Starr King's statue at the Capitol in Washington, D. C., on March 1, 1931, Senator Shortridge said:

"It can be said in very truth that Thomas Starr King fell in love with California and that California fell in love with him. No pen, no tongue, has more vividly or more eloquently described and portrayed

the physical glories of that state than did the pen and tongue of this reverend man.

"But you may ask me why we loved him; why we exalt him; why we place him in bronze here in the Capitol of the Republic. Soon after his coming to California the battle of brothers, the Civil War, broke out. Thomas Starr King hated no man, no State, but oh how he revered the Constitution and loved the Republic . . ."

His portrait hangs in the State House at Sacramento and in resolutions passed by the Legislature, Thomas Starr King is described as "the man whose matchless oratory saved California to the Union." San Francisco named a downtown street after him.

Sources: Dictionary of American Biography; History of California, Vol. 4 - Eldredge; California, A History - Rolle; Heroes of California - James; Record from the Unveiling of the Statues, 3/1/31

Dues reminder

All dues and subscriptions are payable Jan. 1. Annual dues, which include the newsletter, are \$25 of which \$5 goes to battlefield preservation. Newsletter subscriptions are \$10. Checks should be made out to SJVCWRT and mailed to Wayne Bowen, P.O. Box 5695, Fresno, CA. 93755.

Richmond (Continued)

was seriously wounded at Fair Oaks and taken to a hospital in Richmond.

McClellan, who had seen none of the action because of a malaria attack, ordered his troops to dig in deep, constructing elaborate defenses and moving in heavy artillery for a siege of Richmond.

President Jefferson Davis now made one of his best decisions of the war. He named Robert E. Lee as commander of the Confederate forces to replace Johnston. Lee wasted no time in ordering a strengthening of the earthwork defensive lines around Richmond, and although replacement troops were arriving from South Carolina and Georgia, the Confederates were still outnumbered 2-1.

On June 26, Lee, deciding offense was a good defense, ordered the assault on the entrenched Federal forces around Mechanicsville. This was the beginning of what became known as the Seven Days

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Battles. The Mechanicsville attack was a disaster for Lee. One Confederate regiment, the 44th Georgia, lost 335 men out of 514. In all the Confederates lost 1,484 men killed and wounded. The Federals had 361 casualties.

Yet the cautious McClellan ordered the Union troops to retreat four miles to a second defensive line near Gaines Mill. Here, the Union forces, under General Fitz-John Porter, staged a magnificent stand on June 27, but the Confederates poured in more and more men until at last the Federal troops retreated across the Chickahominy River. The cost was frightening. The Confederates lost 8,751 men, while the Union forces lost 6,837, including 2,836 taken prisoner.

The overly cautious McClellan now made a major tactical mistake. He ordered his army to withdraw from the fortified positions and to retreat to the James River where they would have support from the guns of the Federal navy. Generals Philip Kearney and Joe Hooker protested in vain. They wanted to attack Richmond. Federal pickets were only four miles from Richmond.

However, McClellan was convinced by erroneous reports, that Lee now had 200,000 troops which

would greatly outnumber his army. He again demanded Lincoln send reinforcements.

Lee's troops attempted to attack the Federal supply wagons and ran into the courageous General Fitz-John Porter's troops in a solid defensive position atop Malvern Hill. The Confederates hurled wave after wave of infantry up the hill and were cut down by heavy artillery, reinforced by fire from Federal gunboats, a line of Berdan's sharpshooters and fierce musket fire from infantry.

When darkness came, Confederate casualties totaled 5,355 while the Federals lost 397 killed, 2,092 wounded and 725 missing. Yet the Seven Days Battles were over. Richmond was saved at a cost of 20,614 men, nearly one fourth of those in Lee's command when the Seven Days Battles began. The Union had lost 15,849 men and the opportunity to bring a quick end to the war.

Both armies spent the next month in reorganizing and recovering. There were many more bloody battles to come.

Sources: *Forward to Richmond and Lee Takes Command*, Time-Life Books; *Battle Cry of Freedom*, by James M. McPherson, Oxford University Press, and *Campfire and Battlefield*, by Rossiter Johnson, Fairfax Press.

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