



19th Corps Trenches



Alfred R. Waud Library of Congress

“...19th corps driven out of their camp and over the earth works”

Monuments of Earth

For those visiting Gettysburg, Antietam, Vicksburg, and other Civil War battlefields, there are monuments, many of them in some cases, all attesting to the bravery of the units they represent.

Here on the Cedar Creek battlefield, there are few monuments in stone - two to Union infantry regiments, and one to Confederate division commander Stephen D. Ramseur, who was mortally wounded and died the day after the battle. But we have something most other battlefields do not - monuments in another form, and these monuments

are something the soldiers actually made themselves. Union trenches, some of the best-preserved Civil War earthworks.

Constructed by soldiers of Gen. William Emory's 19th Corps just days before the October 19, 1864, Battle of Cedar Creek, these trenches were intended to protect the men from an attack coming from the direction of Strasburg and Cedar Creek. They were - and still are - impressive works, and would have seriously impeded any assault, even one made by an enemy force much larger than the Confederate army at Cedar Creek.

History of Fortifications

Soldiers had been constructing fortifications for several thousand years, particularly those to protect cities, but even in our nation's early years, Americans built defensive works. Consider Breed's/Bunker Hill or Yorktown during the Revolutionary War, or the Battle of New Orleans during the War of 1812. It was no different during the Civil War. Almost as soon as the conflict began, soldiers were ordered to build fortifications around Washington, D.C., and Richmond, Virginia, as well as other cities, both north and south.

Although soldiers on an active campaign did not always entrench early in the war, there were numerous times when they did, and certainly by 1864 it was rare when soldiers on both sides didn't automatically dig trenches when they were encamped at one spot for any length of time. Thus, when Sheridan's Army of the Shenandoah reached the area just north of Cedar Creek on October 10, 1864, soldiers of the 8th and 19th Corps immediately began digging earthworks to protect themselves in the event of a Confederate assault.



Breastworks along North Anna River
May 25, 1864
Library of Congress

Plans for a Confederate Attack

At the time, the 19th Corps earthworks - or trenches - started at the Valley Pike and extended for about a mile north. They included several redoubts - defensive works for artillery batteries - and one redan, or V-shaped work, which was constructed in front of the main line of trenches and intended to serve as an advance warning system.

Thus Lt. Gen. Jubal Early, commanding the Confederate Army of the Valley, initially hesitated making any attack on Sheridan's seemingly impregnable position

until some of his officers came back from Signal Knob, on Massanutten Mountain, however, and reported a weakly-defended Union left flank. Ultimately, the Confederate plan found a way to strike that exposed left flank, and in doing so, caught Maj. Gen. George Crook's 8th Corps completely by surprise. As Crook's men retreated in haste across the Valley Pike and the fields around Belle Grove, Emory's 19th Corps soldiers behind their trenches, soon found themselves being fired upon by Confederates from the rear.

Reversing the Trenches

As the Confederate attack continued, the men of the 19th Corps found themselves in an untenable position. As an officer of the 75th New York Infantry wrote, *"the regiment remained behind the works until all the troops on our left had fallen back, and as the enemy were charging over the works on our left and had already passed in our rear...orders were given for the regiment to do the same...falling back along the line of entrenchments to our right, as our retreat by the rear was already cut off..."*

Further down the 19th Corps line, a member of the 114th New York Infantry would remember that their position *"was now very critical. The enemy had gained possession of the road and, now that the Eighth Corps was hors de combat, was turning his attention to us. Bullets began to reach us, but not from the front, and we saw plainly that if we were going to use this line of breastworks, which had cost us so much hard work, we must get upon the wrong side of them..."*

Preservation of the 19th Corps Trenches



Some thirty years ago, a developer purchased the property where the 19th Corps trenches are located and planned to build houses. Before doing so, the ground had to be "perked" - tested to see if wells could be dug. The tests proved negative, however, and as a result the developer sold the property to the Cedar Creek Battlefield Foundation. Thus, fortuitously, the 19th Corps trenches were saved from destruction, and visitors can still see these "monuments" to the soldiers here at Cedar Creek.

128th New York Monument



128th New York Infantry Monument Dedication Cedar Creek, Virginia
Taken October 15, 1907