

Petersburg National Battlefield VirtualCache Program

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



Site 5: Fort Stedman

N 37° 13'53.486
W 77° 22'11.251



In March 1865, General Robert E. Lee had to face several Union forces in the Shenandoah Valley and the Carolinas, as well as defending his positions around Petersburg. Lee ordered Maj. Gen. John B. Gordon to formulate a plan that would allow the Confederate forces to pull out of Petersburg and perhaps give it the opportunity to link up with the Confederate army in North Carolina under General Joseph E. Johnston.

The battle of Ft Stedman was fought on March 25, 1865, during the final day of the American Civil War. The Union army fortification in the siege lines around Petersburg, Virginia, was attacked in a pre-dawn Confederate assault by troops led by Major General John B. Gordon. The attack was the last serious attempt by Confederate troops to break the Siege of Petersburg.

Fort Stedman stood on Hare's Hill, located two miles east of the center of Petersburg and one mile south of the Appomattox River. The men of the 17th South Carolina claimed that they had built the original structure when Union Maj. Gen. George B. McClellan marched up the Peninsula to threaten Richmond in 1862.¹³ The fort lay on the second line of Confederate defenses that were overrun by Northern divisions during their attacks of June 15-18, 1864. Now turned to Federal use, it was named for Bvt. Brig. Gen. Griffin A. Stedman of the 11th Connecticut Volunteers and Martindale's brigade. On August 5, 1864, Stedman was mortally wounded following a failed Confederate attempt to explode a mine there.

Fort Stedman faced west toward Spring Hill, where the Confederates manned the heavily fortified Colquitt's Salient. Located only 200 yards from Fort Stedman, Colquitt's Salient provided a strong base for staging an attack. Union Capt. William Hodgkins, who studied the

fortifications of both sides and later wrote a book about the battle, recalled: "The batteries in and around this position mounted twenty guns of various calibers. A formidable triple row of cheveaux-de-frise protected it from assault. In rear was a road twenty feet wide, in a broad deep ravine. In great numbers troops could be massed; and the road was continued as a completely covered way as far as Blandford, a suburb of Petersburg."

To the rear, formidable Confederate artillery batteries occupied the high ground on both sides of the Appomattox River.

In contrast, Fort Stedman, though formidable in appearance, was among the weakest links in the Federal line of defenses. The artillery officer of the U. S. IX Corps, Bvt. Brig. Gen. John C. Tidball, said that it "was no fort in the engineering sense of the term, but a struggling work of no regular shape." Captain Hodgkins noted: "It was a comparatively small work without bastions, covering about three-quarters of an acre of ground. In the fort and around it, in rear, was a grove of large shade-trees. . . . Its nearness to the enemy prevented even the slightest repairs." Nearness to the enemy also rendered it vulnerable to a surprise rush from the Southern lines.

North of Fort Stedman was Fort McGilvery, located near the Appomattox River. A line of breastworks extended southward from McGilvery through Union Batteries VIII and IX. The quarter-mile space between Fort Stedman and Battery IX was the most vulnerable point on the line. The ground sloped down to an open plain, low-lying and often wet. The men of the 1st Maine Heavy Artillery had suffered the worst single-action loss of any Civil War regiment in their ill-fated charge across this field on June 18, 1864. Constant picket fire from the enemy prevented completion of the Union works on this exposed site.

According to General Tidball, Fort Stedman, with Batteries X, XI and XII were "to all intents and purposes, one work." Shielding Fort Stedman on the right, Battery X was "an open work" mounting two cannon and mortars. On the ridge to the left, Battery XI was a small, V-shaped "ravelin for two guns." Beyond Battery XI a curtain extended to Battery XII, "a nearly square redoubt mounting four Coehorn mortars." In front of Batteries XI and XII the ground fell down into shallow, creek-lined ravines. Sited on high ground one-half mile to the south of Fort Stedman was Fort Haskell, "a strong fortification mounting six guns, besides mortars."

Captain Hodgkins noted: "The crest upon which Stedman stood was commanded in the immediate rear by two hills of nearly equal height—the Dunn House hill, seven-eighths of a mile distant, on which stood the Dunn House Battery and Fort Friend; and the Friend House hill, one mile and one-quarter distant, a little east of north. Both these hills were partly fortified, and artillery covered the rear and flanks." General Tidball added that these works and others formed "an interior line for some distance in rear of the Stedman front, and then turning to the left, near the Jerusalem Plank Road, made a return line facing to the rear."

As Union Bvt. Maj. Gen. John F. Hartranft noted, Fort Stedman was strategically located: "Fort Stedman, with Batteries IX and X on its right and Batteries XI and XII and Fort Haskell on its left, covered Meade's Station on the United States Military Railroad, the supply route of the army of the Potomac." Meade's Station, which lay only 2,200 yards to the rear, was the supply depot of the IX Corps. Seizure of the high ground between Fort Stedman and Meade's Station would cut Grant's long blue line in two, isolating the Union left and exposing it to being "rolled up" with a flanking attack.

Visit Instructions: What Confederate fort was Ft Stedman built to keep an eye on? The answer can be found on the trail near Ft Stedman.