

General Grant's Headquarters at City Point

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Petersburg National Battlefield
1539 Hickory Hill Road
Petersburg, Virginia 23803



In the spring of 1864, after leading the Army of the Potomac through the Overland Campaign from the Wilderness to Cold Harbor, Lt. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant transferred the army to the south side of the James River in an effort to seize the Confederate supply hub Petersburg. When four days of bloody frontal assaults failed to capture the city, he ordered the army to begin siege operations against it.

For the next nine and one-half months Grant would have his headquarters at City Point, Virginia eight miles behind the siege lines east of Petersburg now referred to as the Eastern Front. A small port town at the confluence of the James and Appomattox Rivers, City Point had been connected to Petersburg by railroad prior to the siege. Its strategic position next to a torn up railroad bed and the rivers offered Grant easy access to points along the front, as well as good transportation and communications with Fort Monroe, Virginia, and Washington, D.C., in the rear. When he arrived at City Point on June 15, 1864, Grant established his headquarters in a tent on the east lawn of Dr. Richard Eppes' home, Appomattox. In turn, the roots of the Civil War, the war's cost and scale, and the war's impact on this nation were woven into this very landscape.

Appomattox Plantation

Built by the Eppes family, this 2,300 acre house and plantation was over one hundred years old on the eve of the war. From this land the 130 slaves whom Dr. Eppes owned had created a financial wealth that made Eppes not only one of the richest men in Virginia but in the South. Though not a strong secessionist, Eppes wanted to maintain his way of life and so he served briefly in the Confederate cavalry. He spent most of the war as a contract surgeon in a Petersburg military hospital. The war destroyed his way of life when it first visited the plantation in 1862. The presence of Union gunboats

forced his wife and children to first seek shelter in Petersburg. Amid the Eppes' loss, a number of slaves gained their freedom a week later when Union troops temporarily landed at City Point. One slave, Richard Slaughter, who left with those Federal troops, later marched through Richmond as a Union soldier when it fell on April 3, 1865. Mrs. Eppes and the children eventually fled to Pennsylvania during the siege, returning in 1865 to help Richard Eppes pick up the pieces of a plantation that had no place in post-war America.

Union Headquarters Grant's Headquarters and Supply Base

As the first man since George Washington to be General in Chief of the United States armies, Grant led the Union war effort from here for nearly the last year of the war. From his tent, and then cabin, overlooking the rivers, he issued orders and coordinated movements of the Federal armies throughout the nation to ultimately defeat the South. While General Philip H. Sheridan battled Confederate forces in the Shenandoah Valley and General William T. Sherman marched across Georgia and up through the Carolinas, Grant relentlessly tightened his grip on Petersburg.

While running the war, Grant received many notable political and military visitors at his headquarters. The list included President Abraham Lincoln, General Sherman, Admiral David Porter, and a Confederate Peace Commission of which Confederate Vice President Alexander Stephens was a member. The most welcome visitors were his wife, Julia, and his son, Jesse, who stayed with him in his cabin for the last three months of the siege.

Supplying the Army

Besides being headquarters for the United States Armies, City Point was the supply base for the Union armies fighting before Petersburg and Richmond. Overnight the tiny village became one of the busiest ports in the world as hundreds of ships arrived off its shores bringing food, clothing, ammunition, and other supplies for the army. On a daily basis 40 steamers, 75 sailing ships, and over 100 barges delivered goods which were unloaded at a half-mile long wharf constructed by Union forces along the base of the bluff by a workforce comprised mostly of African Americans. Warehouses built along the waterfront allowed quartermasters to stockpile vast amounts of supplies. On an average day during the siege, the Union army had stored around City Point thirty days of food and twenty days of forage or 9,000,000 meals of food and 12,000 tons of hay and oats for nearly 100,000 soldiers and 65,000 horses and mules. The army also produced 100,000 rations of bread a day in bakeries it built.

This bread and other supplies were sent to the soldiers at the front by train and by wagon. Using the grade of the old City Point Railroad, the U.S. Military Construction Corps rebuilt the line west to Petersburg, then extended it southwest to behind Union lines. The 26 locomotives and 275 railroad cars were brought by barge from Washington, D.C., to provide rolling stock for the line. In just twenty-two days the army had completed the first stage of the railroad and had the trains operating on a full schedule. Along this twenty-one mile-long rail line supply depots were built, field hospitals established, and communication systems erected. Over this rail line troops were transported to the front and the wounded were taken directly to the hospitals at City Point. At Petersburg, Union victory arrived by sail and was delivered by rail.

The Depot Field Hospital

Seven hospitals operated at City Point during the siege with the largest being the Depot Field Hospital which covered an area of 200 acres. The hospital, with a capacity of 10,000 patients, treated both Union and Confederate wounded with a separate facility for black Union soldiers. The 1,200 tents, supplemented in winter by 90 log barracks, comprised the compound which included laundries, dispensaries, regular and special diet kitchens, dining halls, offices, and other structures. Army surgeons administered the hospital aided by civilian agencies such as the U.S. Sanitary and U.S. Christian Commissions. Male nurses drawn from the army's ranks, a small number of women serving as nurses and kitchen managers, and nearly 200 hundred black laborers kept the hospital clean and comfortable. Each patient had his own bed and washbasin and regularly received fresh pillows and linens. Covered walkways between the tents shaded patients from the sun, while water pumped up from the Appomattox River was used for cleaning and bathing. The excellence of the facilities and the efficiency and dedication of the staff made the Depot Field Hospital not only the largest operation of its kind in the Civil War, but also the finest.

A New Nation Lincoln

President Lincoln's second trip to City Point was during the final two weeks of the war. On March 28, 1865 he met with generals Grant and Sherman and Admiral Porter aboard the River Queen where Lincoln was staying for this visit. This conference offers one of the few glimpses into Lincoln's vision for post-war America. He expressed to his commanders policies that were key to his reconstruction plans:

"liberal and honorable" terms of surrender to the Confederate armies still in the field; general amnesty for participants in the rebellion; immediate restoration of citizenship for the Southern people; and the gradual transition of state governments in the South. This vision laid the foundation for the magnanimous surrender terms offered by Grant and Sherman to the defeated Confederate armies.

Military District #1

In the era of Reconstruction immediately following the war, the South was divided into military districts; Dr. Eppes found his reclaimed home in Military District #1. During this time at City Point, the Eppes family willingly boarded U.S. troops in their home, acquired government lumber and property, and dealt with some "rowdy" soldiers. Dr. Eppes helped the accommodation of missionary teachers to teach the black children of City Point and provided a plot of land for a chapel to be built by a local African-American congregation.

The most dramatic change was the new political landscape of blacks and recently-arriving northern white "radicals" voting together to pass the state constitution. Its passage left Eppes feeling "horrified" as it allowed blacks the right to vote and forced southerners to take oaths of allegiance in order to vote or hold public office. As Eppes hoped to "witness our [his] poor distracted country at peace and rest," his laborers who could vote and be paid for their work for the first time in their lives may have suffered no such distraction.

"... the old squabble between Capital and Labor"

The new nation also manifested itself at City Point through the old struggle "between Capital and Labor" which was new among these Southern plantations. In January of 1866 Eppes noted in detail the resolutions of the James River Farmers. This organization of area plantation owners had "the purpose of adopting some fixed rules and regulations for the government alike of the farmers themselves and the freedmen employed by them." A few months later, Eppes wrote that black laborers, "imitating their white brethren [.]

had a meeting a few days since and agreed not to work for less than \$2.00 per day." Though Eppes' price was fifty cents per day, he was still able to employ a labor force with some success. Among those he employed, only a few were owned by him before the war. As Dr. Eppes tried to understand the "experience of farming with free labour," the black and white citizenry of City Point, much like the rest of the country, tried to understand what freedom meant in this new nation.

