

# On Richmond's FRONT LINE

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## Drewry's Bluff / Fort Darling

Some 19th century accounts called Drewry's Bluff and the fort there "the Gibraltar of the Confederacy." The analogy was not meant to suggest that the bluff looked like an enormous Mediterranean rock. Instead it

referred to the fact that the James River flowing beneath the tall bluff was not unlike the Strait of Gibraltar, the narrow waterway that connects the Atlantic Ocean with the Mediterranean beneath the famous profile of the Rock of Gibraltar.

The two sites are not much alike, of course, except when compared for military purposes. Each was a highly significant bottleneck in different wars. At Drewry's Bluff, the James River flows past on its way south and east from Richmond toward the Chesapeake Bay. That river grows steadily wider, soon becoming almost indefensible for shore based Civil War weapons. Thus the importance of Drewry's Bluff, which towers some 90 feet over the river. The James is only

about 650 feet wide at that point. Southern strategists recognized early in 1862, if not before, that Drewry's Bluff would be the key to a successful defense of Richmond against the powerful United States Navy.

the Confederate engineer service when he took charge of the project. Mason worked just as hard at sinking obstructions in the James River as he did at erecting the walls of the fort. If the Federal navy steamed upriver, even the

Confederate cannon atop the bluff could only get off a few shots before the warships raced past on the way to Richmond. It was imperative that Mason build obstructions in the river formidable enough to stall the enemy, allowing the defenders on the bluff extra time to batter their foe.

The crisis came just eight weeks after

work started. John Rodgers led his five ship flotilla (including the world famous *USS Monitor*) up the narrowing river in the middle of May. His success or failure would greatly affect the strategy of George McClellan's peninsula campaign. Should Rodgers reach Richmond, he had written orders to shell the city into submission. If



*A revealing 1865 photograph shows the cemetery and chapel at Drewry's Bluff. The fort's entrance is just above the largest white headstone.*

Confederate authorities earmarked \$10,000 (still a substantial amount then, before inflation corrupted the value of Confederate currency) and designated Charles T. Mason to supervise the work of building a fort and obstructing the river channel at Drewry's Bluff. Mason had taken his Virginia Military Institute education and entered practice as a professional engineer. He was a lieutenant in

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that did not literally end the war in central Virginia, it would at least protect McClellan's flank while he approached Richmond on land. If Rodgers failed, McClellan's situation would be more tenuous.

Just as Lieutenant Mason had anticipated, the obstructions proved to be the key when the battle erupted on the morning

of May 15. Rodgers and his officers could see at a glance that their heavy warships could not float over the obstructions. A four hour duel with the eight or nine Confederate cannon in and around the partially finished Fort Drewry (called Fort Darling in some Federal sources) ended with neither side having a distinct advantage. Rodgers had no legitimate alternative other than to retreat

back down the James, leaving the waterborne approach to Richmond secure. The Federal navy never tested it again.

Soon thereafter Drewry's Bluff began its evolution into a signifi-



*Looking east across the James River. Fort Drewry is not visible uphill to the left. Notice the mid-river obstructions.*

cant military post. The Confederate States Marine Corps established its camp of instruction there; the new Confederate States Naval Academy operated at the bluff and on the schoolship *Patrick Henry* in mid-river; and Drewry's Bluff became one of the leading tourist attractions in Civil War Virginia. A small steamer offered daily roundtrips for civilians, who often took picnic lunches and

roamed the the site at will. Security did not seem to be a concern.

For much of the war Robert E. Lee's older brother Sidney Smith Lee had overall command at the

bluff. Under his supervision the fort went from probably just one riverside embankment in May 1862 to an enclosed strongpoint with heavy cannon facing inland as well as

downriver. Those defenses did not come into play in May 1864 when Benjamin F. Butler's Army of the James menaced Richmond from the south at Bermuda Hundred. Confederate defenders blocked Butler's infantry about a mile south of the fort before permanently folding them back into the Bermuda Hundred peninsula.

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## The Bluff After the War

[An interesting account describing the condition of Drewry's Bluff appeared in a Richmond newspaper in July 1867. Here are some excerpts.]

"Viewed from the deck of the passing steamer, looking upon the immense and frowning brow the Bluff, overtopping and overhanging the river at its bend here, one gets a meagre idea of the Bluff and its defences. To one behind the bushes the secret of the impregnability of the works is plain. It is nothing more than nature strengthened by art, and nature seems to have intended that naval aggression against Richmond, from ene-

mies without, should cease here. Straggling along the declivity, the tourist meets with excavations so prodigious, that he pauses and enquires the agencies. Behind him he finds bomb-proofs so substantially built, and yet preserving all their outline, that he is tempted to enter them. All of art is established on a scale of immensity that well comports with the work of nature.

A few of the [bomb]proofs are in a tumble down state, but the larger number are stronger and more intact than in the days that witnessed their erection. I penetrated to the depths of one, and found it perfect, cool and deep, a

perfect stairway leading down into the subterranean passage.

The main works of the bluff, overtopping the height above the Bluff proper, are in a perfect state of preservation. The fortifications and bomb-proofs are overgrown by a most luxuriant growth of grass and weeds. No trees and undergrowth shut in the works here, but they stand forth boldly, like a brave man with his hat off, lowering upon the river. This locality was called "Vine Hill" until "bluffed off" by the war."

## Annual Meeting

The organization's annual meeting always occurs on the second Saturday of June, which in 2007 is June 9. In previous years meetings have been at Gaines's Mill, Fort Harrison, Cold Harbor, Frayser's Farm / Glendale, and Malvern Hill. This year's gathering will be at Drewry's Bluff, eight miles south of Richmond in Chesterfield County.

Park Service historian Robert E. L. Krick will lead a walking tour of the site, as comprehensive as possible given the limited amount of acreage there. He will give a special emphasis to subjects and locations not commonly addressed by the standard signs and interpretation placed at the site by the

National Park Service.

The RBA's annual meeting will follow the tour. As always, this is an opportunity for members to enjoy a relaxed tour of an historic site, with direct access to the organization's board members at the annual meeting.

The event will begin at 10.00 a.m. and last approximately two hours. It is free to everyone, including non-members. On-site parking is available but not abundant. Please carpool with friends if possible. Direct any questions to the RBA's webmaster at: [admin@saverichmondbattlefields.org](mailto:admin@saverichmondbattlefields.org) See the back page for the map to the site of the annual meeting.

## Drewry's cont...

Today the entire fort survives in a fine state of preservation, but many of the related sites from the post are gone. None of the wartime buildings stand. The site of the Marine Corps camp is privately owned. The RBA made an effort several years ago to purchase that spot; something positive could still happen there in the future.

Because Drewry's Bluff and its fort only saw one day of combat between 1861 and 1865, they rarely attract the attention they deserve. A whole series of Union army and navy commanders wrestled every spring with the problem of capturing Richmond. The fact that Drewry's Bluff stood as an unbreakable obstacle made their task that much more challenging.

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## Other reading on Drewry's Bluff

A pair of books on the 1864 Bermuda Hundred Campaign (by Schiller and Robertson) address the Second Battle of Drewry's Bluff in detail, but neither is detailed on the fort at the bluff or on the extended camp that grew up there. For those interested in learning more about the post of Drewry's Bluff, here are some recommended sources:

John Coski, *Capital Navy* (Campbell, Calif.: Savas Woodbury, 1996). This is now available in paperback. In addition to strong sections on Drewry's Bluff, Coski's book offers a first rate analysis of Confederate naval operations on the James at and below Richmond.

James Lee Conrad, *Rebel Reefers: The Organization and Midshipmen of the Confederate States Naval Academy* (Cambridge: DaCapa, 2003). Because the naval academy operated at Drewry's Bluff, this is a good resource for understanding some of the daily operations there.

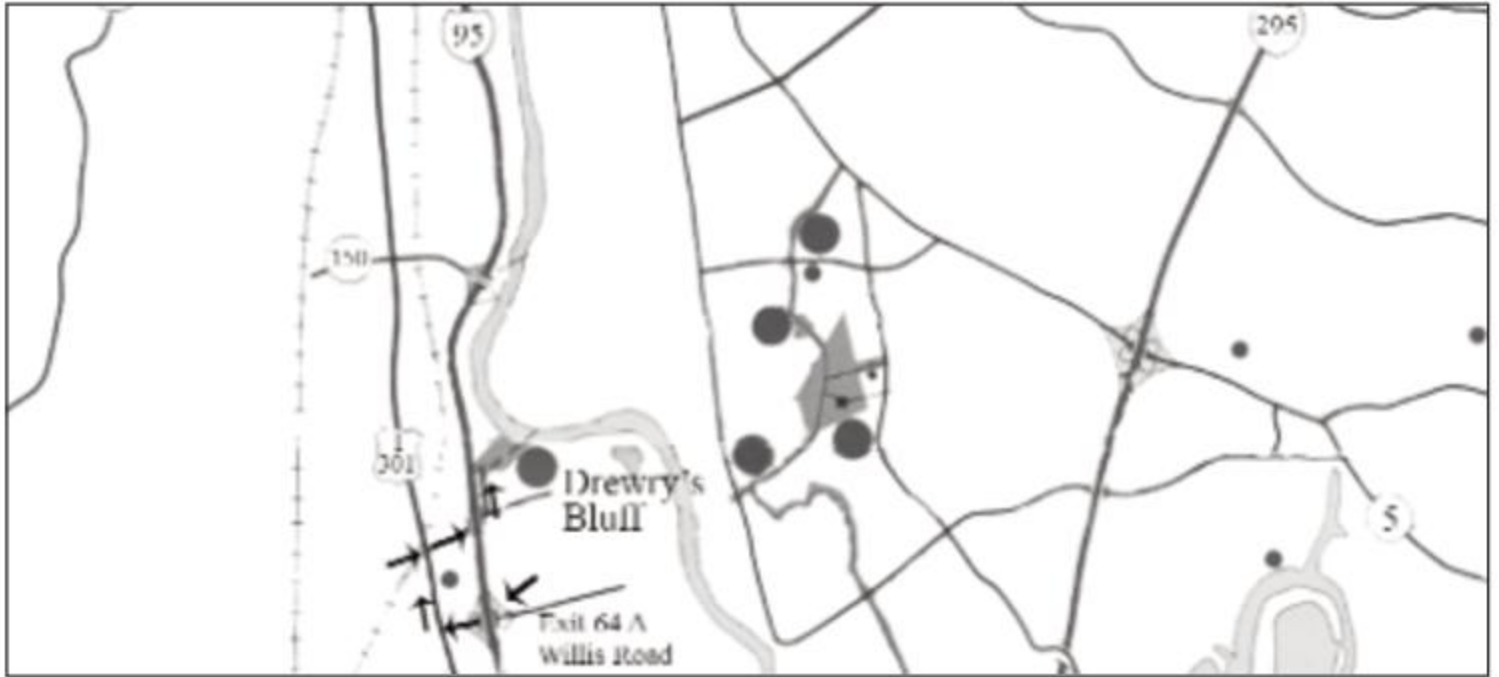
Edwin C. Bearss, *River of Lost Opportunities: The Civil War on the James River, 1861-1862* (Lynchburg, Va.: H. E. Howard, Inc., 1995). While most of this deals with the May 1862 battle, it also devotes considerable space to the pre-battle construction of the fort and the post-battle improvements during the summer of 1862.

Also, a series of several dozen outstanding photographs from 1865 survive, and all are available at the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs website. They have been scanned at extremely high resolution. Browsing through them is an excellent way of learning more about Drewry's Bluff, and also makes for good preparation for the annual meeting, where we will view some of those same photographs on the spots where they were taken.

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To get to Drewry's Bluff, take Exit 64 A/Willis Road off of I-95. Travel under I-95. At Route 1/301 turn right (north). Proceed about one-half mile and turn right onto Bellwood Road (Va. #656). Follow this road across the railroad tracks and back under the interstate before turning left where the signs point toward Drewry's Bluff.

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