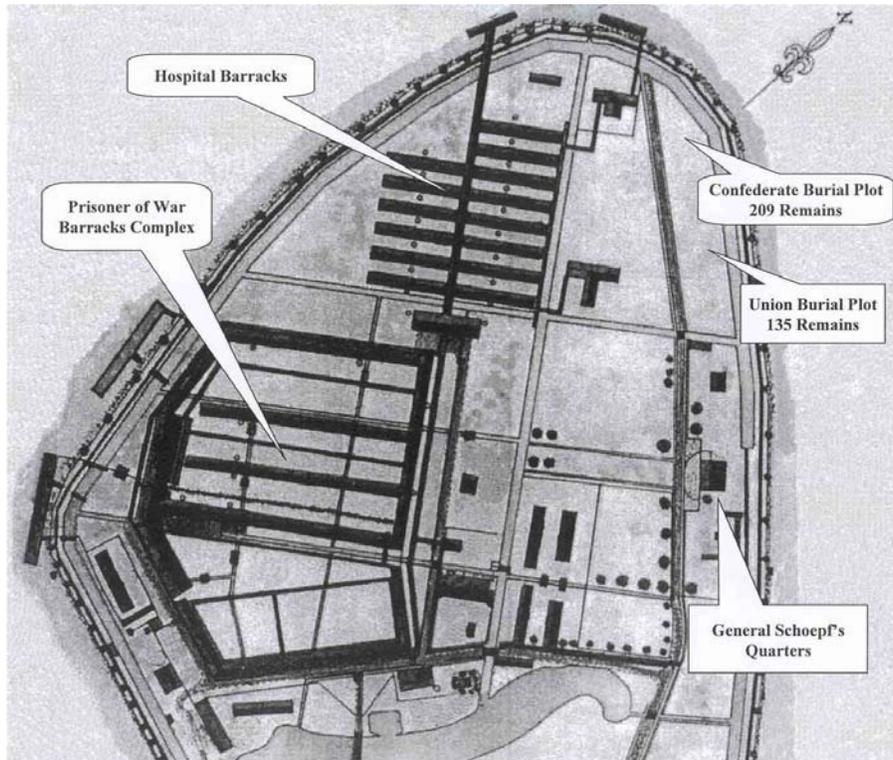


Civil War Burials on Pea Patch Island

by R. Hugh Simmons©



**Location of Cemetery Plots on Pea Patch Island
Prior to Removal in November 1875**

The burial ground on the Government Farm at Finns Point in Salem County, New Jersey was not always used to bury the dead from Fort Delaware during the course of the Civil War. Archival information available today suggests that this burial ground did not come into use until June of 1863 after the capacity of the prison camp at Fort Delaware had been substantially expanded to hold 10,000 military prisoners of war. After June 1863, burials of Confederates were made on the Island only when bad weather prevented the burial detail from getting to Finns Point.

A letter written by Dr. Colin Arrott, a contract surgeon at Fort Delaware, was passed around the U. S. War Department and referred to the Chief of Engineers by the Adjutant General on May 11, 1863. Dr.

Arrott recommended the use of the Government Farm in New Jersey as a burial ground. This letter is currently missing from its place in the National Archives and a search has been requested to find a copy.

Fort Delaware guard and diarist, Private A. J. Hamilton of Pittsburgh's Independent Battery G, arrived in September 1862. He made note of the deaths of three members of his company who were buried in Delaware City and of two other deaths following which the bodies were shipped home at some expense. Hamilton first took note of burial details being sent over to Finns Point in his diary on June 15, 1863. This was six days after the arrival at Fort Delaware of some 2,400 Confederate military prisoners captured in Mississippi.

Fort Delaware Special Orders No. 120 issued July 20, 1863 created a permanent guard detail (a Sergeant and 4 Privates) to accompany the burial parties over to Finns Point. The duty of this guard detail was to keep the members of the burial party inside the bounds of the cemetery. New Jersey farmers had recently complained that parties detached to dig graves at the Finns Point burial ground were scattering among the nearby farms and "committing depredations." The language of this special order strongly suggests that usage of the burial ground at Finns Point was a new activity in the routines of the Fort Delaware garrison.

These three separate and independent bits of information strongly suggest that prior to June 1863, burials of the Union and Confederate dead from Fort Delaware were made at places other than Finns Point. Prior to June 1863, as many as 100 military prisoners and garrison members died.

The Fort Delaware Society's publication *They Died at Fort Delaware* (June 1997) lists the names of 92 Confederate prisoners who died between April 9, 1862 and June 10, 1863. The 1912 War Department register of Confederate dead contains the names of only 31 of these early war deaths. However, other published War Department reports document 66 POW deaths at Fort Delaware between July 1, 1862 and June 1, 1863. Samuel Bates' *History of Pennsylvania Volunteers* indicates that 8 Union soldiers died during this period, in addition to the 3 buried in Delaware City and the two whose remains were sent home.

Six Confederate soldiers were buried in the church yard of Christ Episcopal Church in Delaware City. These men died between April 9, 1862 and December 15, 1862. Their remains were disinterred on December 22, 1870 by a local undertaker and removed to an undisclosed location believed to be the soldier's burial ground at Finns Point. Three

Union soldiers who died in October 1862 [*all comrades of A. J. Hamilton*] also appear in the Christ Episcopal Church records. These remains were later removed at an unknown date and to an unknown location. [*See "Prisoners Buried in Delaware City," Fort Delaware Notes, April 1980.*]

There are wartime burials present in the Presbyterian/Methodist and Catholic church cemetery grounds at Delaware City of Union soldiers from Fort Delaware. Research done by Society member Jocelyn Jamison indicates that two of those buried in the Catholic section were Confederates from Alabama. But the cemetery grounds generally do not appear to be sufficiently large to have accommodated up to 100 Confederate and Union burials prior to June 1863. Burials in other Delaware churchyards have been rumored, but never documented.

The fact that some burials were made on Pea Patch Island in spite of the obvious problems with the high water table was first documented in a report written by Lieutenant E. L. Meands to Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton on March 28, 1866. This report states that there were two separate burial plots. The larger plot was reported to contain 43 graves (with headboards) and the smaller plot 22 graves (without headboards). Lieutenant Meands noted that the smaller plot was "near the river" and the water had broken over or through the dikes and washed the other headboards away during a severe storm." [*See "God's Acre on Pea Patch," Fort Delaware Notes, January 1961.*]

Adjutant General E. D. Townsend wrote to Virginia's Governor James L. Kemper [*formerly a brigade commander in Pickett's Division, Army of Northern Virginia*] in October 1875 advising that the burial grounds at Finns Point would be upgraded to a National Cemetery. He stated that "-- the Quartermaster General will be directed to have the remains of the soldiers - Union and Confederate - buried on Pea Patch Island - transferred to the Finns Point National Cemetery --." [*See "Finns Point - Bivouac of the Dead," Fort Delaware Notes, April 1983.*]

In response to Governor Kemper's initial inquiry made in May 1875, Colonel Oscar A. Mack, 21st United States Infantry, was appointed to examine the burials on Pea Patch Island and at Finns Point and to make a recommendation about establishing a National Cemetery for these remains. Colonel Mack visited on June 15, 1875 and reported his observations to Secretary of War W. W. Belknap two days later.

Colonel Mack wrote: "This land is so low that graves cannot be dug without reaching water. Therefore, the few burials that have been made on

the Island have been made in graves above the natural surface by grading up the ground set apart for this purpose. *[This turned out not to be true.]*

"These consist of two small lots situated near the upper end of the Island. The first, or lower one, has been used as a burying ground for many years. It is rectangular, about 76 feet long by 64 feet wide and is enclosed by a high wooden picket fence on three sides and by the ditch on the fourth side. The fence is in good order. The palings are dressed and are painted red.

"Three fourths of this lot have been raised about three (3) feet and contains the graves of Union soldiers, and also probably the graves of citizens and Confederate soldiers. 142 Union soldiers are reported as buried here, but no correct data is at hand *[author's underlining]*. But very few of the headboards are standing, and those few are so much weather worn that the inscriptions cannot be made out. There is one marble slab indicating the grave of a citizen. The graves are not mounded up - the turf is good and the grass rank - it will soon be cut for hay.

"The ditch is subject to the ebb and flow of the tide, and the current is cutting into the bank slowly - the outer graves will soon be disturbed if this process continues.

"The other lot is a few yards above this one. It is about 156 feet long on the front and 40 feet wide. It is enclosed on three sides by a wooden fence similar to the one above mentioned.

"The ditch curves around the fourth side which will measure perhaps two hundred feet. The half of the lot next to the ditch is raised about three (3) feet, and contains the graves of Confederate soldiers - prisoners of war. The current of the ditch is also near the outer row of graves.

"The graves are not mounded up and none of the head-boards are standing. A portion of the turf is poor and only bears sorrel - the rest (3/4 perhaps) is good and is covered with tall grass.

"The inner half of this is not raised and contains no graves. It is clothed with a rank growth of grass. The whole lot will soon be mowed. There are no trees or shrubs in either of these two lots."

Five months later, Oliver Cox, a civil engineer working for the Quartermaster Department, was assigned to oversee the removal of these remains and their reburial at Finns Point. He issued his final report on November 25, 1875 to Colonel A. F. Rockwell, Quartermaster officer in charge of the National Cemetery program, in Washington, DC.

Cox wrote: "The island is very low, and before reclaimed from the river by a dike which surrounds it, was submerged at flood tide. Inside the dike, along its base, is a canal (or ditch) used for draining the Island; the waters of which are discharged into the river at ebb tide. On the upper part of the Island from the Fort were located two rectangular cemeteries on lots about 50 yards apart, each enclosed on the three sides by a good picket fence and the fourth side of each bounded by the said ditch canal. Of these, the one nearest the Fort was known as the Union Cemetery and the other farthest up the Island as the Confederate.

"They were used for burial purpose only during the winter, when, on account of ice or storm, the river could not be crossed to inter at Finns Point. *[True only after May 1863 for the Confederates. Apparently most Union remains were buried on the Island throughout the war.]* The Union Cemetery contained about 1/4 of an acre, the Confederate about 1/8 of an acre. Neither of these lots was fully occupied by graves. In each, adjacent to and parallel with the ditch was a mound or terrace from 3 to 4 feet high and varying in width from 30 to 60 feet; in which mound or terrace it was supposed the bodies were buried, simply by placing the coffins on the surface of the ground and mounding the dirt over them. This however was found to be a mistake."

Cox noted that since some of the dead were probably victims of smallpox, advice was sought from the Philadelphia Board of Health. The Board gave the opinion that with the passage of time, there could be little, if any, danger and the work was commenced on November 15th.

Cox continued in his report: "On opening the trenches & graves it was found that there had been interred 135 Union and 209 Confederates *[Cox's underscoring]*; and of these, 22 coffins though well preserved, were found to contain nothing. It is thought that their remains may have been removed by friends. *[It is not clear which of these 22 empty coffins were Union and which were Confederate. Perhaps these were the 22 Confederate "graves" observed by Lieutenant Meands in 1866.]*

"Instead of the bodies having been interred in the mound or terraces as was supposed, they had been buried from 2 1/2 to 3 feet below the surface of the Island and the mound had been subsequently placed over the graves. This gave an average depth of 5 or more feet to the graves which greatly increased the labor and made the work still more disagreeable by the coffins having been imbedded a foot or more in mud and water.

"The remains and the coffins were in every state of decay. Some bodies were nearly as perfect as when first buried, while others, it was with great difficulty that the bones could be gathered. Being all exhumed and placed in coffins and each numbered according to its Range & Section, they were taken across the river to the Government wharf [*at the Finns Point Military Reservation*], and thence by wagons about a 1/2 mile to the Cemetery and interred in separate graves, and in the parts of the Cemetery which had previously been assigned to the Union & Confederates. At each grave there has been placed a small headboard, and it numbered to correspond with the original interment, so that, should the burial record be subsequently found, each grave can be identified."

Cox described the new "coffins" as simple pine boxes 3 feet by 1 foot by 1 foot in dimension. He ordered 340 pre-made and his laborers dug spaces for 350 graves over in Finns Point to receive them.

Cox wrote: "The Confederates are interred in the northern part. Those interred during the war are in 4 rows of pits and 7 trenches all parallel and extending across the cemetery from east to west. They are buried 3 or 4 deep in the trenches and supposed to number 2,300 bodies. The 209 [*Cox's underscoring*] recently buried from the Island are in ranges and in separate graves, and arranged with the view to subsequently laying out the Cemetery into walks and sections."

Cox wrote: "The Union soldiers are interred in the southern part, in separate graves and in such order as to admit of subsequently beautifying and ornamenting the grounds." Two other 1875 reports state that there were 10 Union soldiers already buried on the south side of the cemetery in individual graves marked with headboards prior to the interment of the 135 additional remains from Pea Patch Island.

Colonel Mack reported in June 1875 that: "As to the number of burials here [*Finns Point*], it is rather difficult to determine accurately. General L. Thomas in his report for 1868, on National Cemeteries states that 10 Union and 1435 Confederate soldiers are buried in this cemetery. The Union soldiers are buried [*author's underlining*] on the opposite side of the lot in single graves and their number is correctly reported. The head-boards at these graves have all fallen down except one."

There is nothing visible in Finns Point National Cemetery today to suggest where the 209 Confederates and 135 Union remains removed from Pea Patch Island in November 1875 were placed. Nor are the 10 Union graves which were confirmed by Colonel Mack to have been there prior to

1875 now marked. The Union monument erected at Finns Point in 1879 lists the names of 105 Union soldiers known to have died while at Fort Delaware and notes that 30 more buried there are unknown.

Assistant Adjutant General S. N. Benjamin declared in a letter to Colonel Mack dated June 17, 1875 that 25,275 Confederate prisoners were confined at Fort Delaware during the war and that 2,502 had died. Both Colonel Mack and Oliver Cox estimated the wartime Confederate burials at Finns Point to have been about 2,300 by subtracting the remains on Pea Patch Island from the official total. The 1912 War Department list contains the names of 2,436 Confederate soldiers and 36 civilian detainees who were known to have died while prisoners at Fort Delaware. The Society publication *They Died at Fort Delaware* presents the names of more than 2,900 Confederates and 39 civilian detainees who died.

Assistant Engineer John J. Lee, resident civil engineer in charge of Fort Delaware and Pea Patch Island in 1875, complained to his boss, Lieutenant Colonel John D. Kurtz, Philadelphia District Engineer, that the Quartermaster's exhumation work crew had left the job site in disarray. "The rows of coffins were uncovered down to the lids, which were then pulled off; the bones were separated with shovels from the soft mud which filled the coffins and were put into boxes of about 3 feet in length. The coffin lids were then thrown back, and the trenches partly filled in, as the work of uncovering the next row went on. The ground is left without any attempt at grading, with some of the coffin lids slightly covered, some of the trenches half filled, others more, and with piles of earth here and there." These problems were soon corrected to John Lee's satisfaction.

An 1874 plan for a submarine mine defense system had called for a Torpedo Casemate, or operating room, to be built where the Confederate burial plot was located. Both Engineer Lee and Colonel Kurtz were eager to have these Civil War remains removed to Finns Point in 1875 so that they could proceed with their construction project. However, funding was never provided and the 1874 casemate never built.

By 1892, this area of the Island had been filled in further and the Mine Control Casemate and Cable Gallery required for a new submarine electric mining system were constructed roughly over the site of the 1864 small-pox hospital near the Confederate burial plot. Today nothing remains that would indicate the presence of these wartime burials.