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## Richmond National Battlefield Park

Albert Wilson  
*Gettysburg College*

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# Richmond National Battlefield Park

## **Abstract**

*This post is part of a series featuring behind-the-scenes dispatches from our [Pohanka Interns](#) on the front lines of history this summer as interpreters, archivists, and preservationists. See [here](#) for the introduction to the series.*

Richmond National Battlefield Park consists of thirteen sites around Richmond that document the battles for control of the Confederate capital. Several of the park sites feature earthworks; at Fort Harrison the earthen wall of the fort towers twenty feet over the ditch below, by the Totopotomoy Creek the earthworks have been eroded to barely a few inches in height. But the most infamous earthworks are on the Cold Harbor battlefield. [excerpt]

## **Keywords**

A Look at the Past, Pohanka Internship, Thinking Historically

## **Disciplines**

History | Military History | Public History | United States History

## **Comments**

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# THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

## ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

### Richmond National Battlefield Park

By *Albert Wilson '21*

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Richmond National Battlefield Park consists of thirteen sites around Richmond that document the battles for control of the Confederate capital. Several of the park sites feature earthworks; at Fort Harrison the earthen wall of the fort towers twenty feet over the ditch below, by the Totopotomoy Creek the earthworks have been eroded to barely a few inches in height. But the most infamous earthworks are on the Cold Harbor battlefield.

The earthworks that remain at this site are all original. Some are in pristine condition, all they are missing are reinforcement and header logs. Usually one is forbidden on earthworks, but there is a segment along one of the park's trails where visitors are allowed to walk down through a segment of earthworks and get an impression of what fighting in these trenches was like. Forest had taken over much of the property. While the ground was clear land during the battle, today tree growth (and thus root growth) as well as leaf cover helps to prevent erosion of these earthworks in the sandy soil. It then becomes a challenge for visitors to imagine that battlefield not as a forest but as a open field, earthworks not as a line of earth but as a barrier crowded by soldiers.

Now the 1864 Overland Campaign had a two-fold goal for the Army of the Potomac: capture Richmond and destroy the Army of Northern Virginia along the way. The Confederates countered this by staying between the Union army and Richmond, and by digging earthwork defenses wherever their army stopped. Many Union soldiers feared (and found true) that once the Confederates were dug in, these earthworks were an almost impenetrable defense. The morning of June 3, 1864 finds the Confederates dug into earthworks with Richmond just 10 miles to their backs. At 4:30am, General Grant orders a frontal assault upon this line of earthworks that proves futile, as the Confederate defenders fire volley after murderous volleys into advancing Union soldiers. After the bloodshed of that morning, many Union soldiers were hesitant (if not outright refused) to advance again upon enemy earthworks, as the horrors of Cold Harbor were clear in their heads.

The earthwork remains are pivotal to the story of Cold Harbor, not just as a line of defense on June 3, but what these earthworks mean in the mythology of the Civil War. It is shortly after the Battle of Cold Harbor that the insult of "Grant the Butcher" begins appearing in newspapers

unfriendly to the Lincoln administration. This attempt at slander accuses Grant of throwing wave after wave of troops into impenetrable Confederate lines because Grant did not care that greatly for the lives of his soldiers. Visitors to the park still repeat and still believe the line of Grant the Butcher over 155 years later. When discussing the battle, the easiest way to dispel this myth is putting the bloodshed into context. Grant suffered heavily, taking almost twice as many casualties as Confederate General Lee. But this battle's casualty figure does not make it the bloodiest battle of the Overland campaign, and there are individual days of the Civil War bloodier than the two weeks spent at Cold Harbor. Grant would write in his memoirs "I have always regretted the last assault at Cold Harbor was ever made." It is not hard to imagine the bloodshed when looking down range from the top of an earthwork line.

While some segments of earthworks seem impenetrable, other segments are quite vulnerable. About halfway through a tour, one comes to a spot where the line of earthworks is about 80 yards back from the crest of the hill. This is a poor position for earthworks because it provides a limited line of fire for the trench's occupiers. Now on the morning on June 3, despite being ordered to attack, the Union divisions opposite this poorly positioned segment of earthworks failed to attack. So I end my tours with a what if- what if the Union army attacked that poorly positioned segment of line and broke through? The entire memory of the battle could have changed at that segment of earthworks; from a battle that was a vain assault on the part of the Union, to an attack celebrated as the victory that could have ended the war in June of 1864. Visually, one segment of earthworks is only distinguishable from another in terms of height, depth, and length. But each segment of earthworks presents examples on how the story of Cold Harbor is told, and how that story is remembered.



*View down a segment of Confederate earthworks on the Cold Harbor Battlefield. Photo courtesy Albert Wilson.*