

A Brief History of Civil War Fort Duffield, West Point, Kentucky

By James T. R. Jones

Fort Duffield, the largest earthen work Civil War fortress in Kentucky, overlooks West Point, Kentucky, at the border of Jefferson County (home of Louisville) and Hardin County, at the confluence of the Salt and Ohio Rivers. This particular spot was important in the early days of the Civil War for a number of reasons. First, it commanded the Louisville-Nashville Turnpike, which was a potential invasion route for attacking Southern armies. Second, West Point, which was blessed with active river traffic, was a major supply depot for the Union Army based there (which eventually became the Army of the Cumberland) which needed protection; goods would go by river to West Point and then by wagon to the intended recipient (eventually to Major General Buell as far south as southern Tennessee). Third, the Salt River was the last natural barrier to anyone trying to attack Louisville from the west. Thus, a fort over West Point was a high priority. Brigadier General Robert Anderson, the Union officer who surrendered Fort Sumter to Confederate Brigadier General P. G. T. Beauregard in April, 1861, and was then sent to command Union forces around Louisville, started construction of fortifications around West Point in September, 1861. Brigadier General Anderson had to step down due to poor health and was replaced as commander of the Department of the Cumberland by Brigadier General William Tecumseh Sherman. Brigadier General Sherman ordered that the fort, that became known as Fort Duffield, be built.

Construction began in early November, 1861, with much of the work being done by the men of the Ninth Michigan Infantry Regiment commanded by Colonel William Duffield (for whose father, George Duffield, a Michigan clergyman, the fort was named). By March, 1862, the fort was finished and the men of the Ninth moved further south. It was hard work, as the men dug up earth and piled it to make the high walls which characterize Fort Duffield. All trees were cleared out for a one-mile radius around the fort, leaving a clear field of fire for the garrison and its artillery (as many as ten guns). It was an impregnable position, which helps explain why it was never challenged (Brigadier General John Hunt Morgan went west and crossed the Ohio River at Brandenburg; General Braxton Bragg's army turned east to Perryville). While there may be more to this than the fort, the fact remains it did its job well.

Like all things, the fort had a cost. Sixty-one men from the Ninth Michigan died of disease and privation building the fort and were buried on Memorial Hill. Today, a beautiful memorial cemetery stands there and over it flies, on special occasions, a thirty-four star U.S. flag (like flown in 1861-62). This flag along with a flagpole were donated to Fort Duffield by the Second Kentucky Infantry (C.S.A.) on May 31, 1999.

As the war went on, it moved away from Louisville. By some time, in 1863, the fort was no longer garrisoned on any regular basis. In fact, during 1864, Confederate guerrillas occupied it several times, burning the huts the Union soldiers had built, during the winter of 1861-62, in the process.

After the war, the land on which the fort lies went through various hands and had various uses, including as a farm, rock quarry, and hunting lodge for one of the du Ponts. In 1895, the Grand Army of the Republic had its [29th National Encampment](#) reunion in Louisville, and Fort Duffield lived again as veterans from the G.A.R. took special trains to West Point and revisited old haunts. By the start of World War I the U.S. Army purchased the property on which the fort lies as part of Fort Knox. There the fort sat, protected from intrusion, until about 1978 when the U.S. Government declared the land surplus and deeded it to the City of West Point for park purposes. In 1992, a group of volunteers began the laborious task of reclaiming Fort Duffield from nature, with results that are visible for all to see.

Fort Duffield is a tremendous, albeit little-known, treasure for the Louisville area. A pristine fortress which brings one right back to those terrible days, in 1861, when anything was possible, be it raid or invasion. It is a wonderful spot for reenactors, especially during the frequent living history weekends.