



A Quiet Corner of the War

By Robert Dunkerly, June 15, 2020

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Blockhouse Point, with the Potomac below and Virginia beyond | courtesy of author

Blockhouse Point Conservation Park is a county-run park in Montgomery County, Maryland, just northwest of Washington, D.C. While it includes several miles of hiking and horse trails, the park preserves, as the name suggests, the site of a Civil War blockhouse

The park preserves a site that focuses on a lesser-known aspect of the war. The park's brochure describes it well: "Long hours of picket duty and drill. Swampy camp conditions and muddy drinking water. Forays into Virginia chasing Confederate raiders."

This is a part of the conflict we often gloss over, but it was the reality for much of the war for Union troops in any theater. While the headline events like savage battles, epic marches, and grand campaigns capture our attention, the truth is that the day-to-day reality for many Union troops was something dull and monotonous, and dangerous, like duty at the Potomac River blockhouses.

As the war dragged on and Federal armies penetrated deeper into the Confederacy, occupation and control of captured areas demanded more and more of the Union army's attention. Union commanders had to deal with civil issues and act as a police force in regions like northern Virginia, middle Tennessee, central Missouri, and the Carolina coast.

Over time the Union government had to adopt, and refine, policies regarding the conduct of the war, interactions with civilians, and procedures for occupying forces. These were issues that commanders had little experience with, and likely had never thought of in the heady, patriotic days of 1861

Union forces arrived here that first year of the war to set up camp. From this isolated outpost, Union troops patrolled the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal, the Potomac River, and nearby roads. They drilled and performed routine camp duties. They interacted with unsympathetic civilians. They explored the hills and valleys in their leisure time. And they likely pondered the movements of the large armies that were making headlines, knowing full well that their trials and tribulations were not being captured for posterity



Interpretive signs explain the area's history | courtesy of author

Moreover, the blockhouse overlooking the Potomac and the C&O Canal was quite literally on the front lines, on the border, with Virginia just across the river. Forays into the Old Dominion would have been frequent, and dangerous. Guerilla activity, much of it led by Col. John S. Mosby, annoyed these occupying troops and disrupted their efforts to maintain the area's security.

The Federals also would have had to interact with civilians, many of whom likely resented their presence. Dozens of local men had left to join Confederate forces and their wives and families remained. Men from New York and Massachusetts likely bought produce or other goods from these civilians, but also had to oversee their movements and monitor their activities. It was an uneasy peace between the civilians and the soldiers.

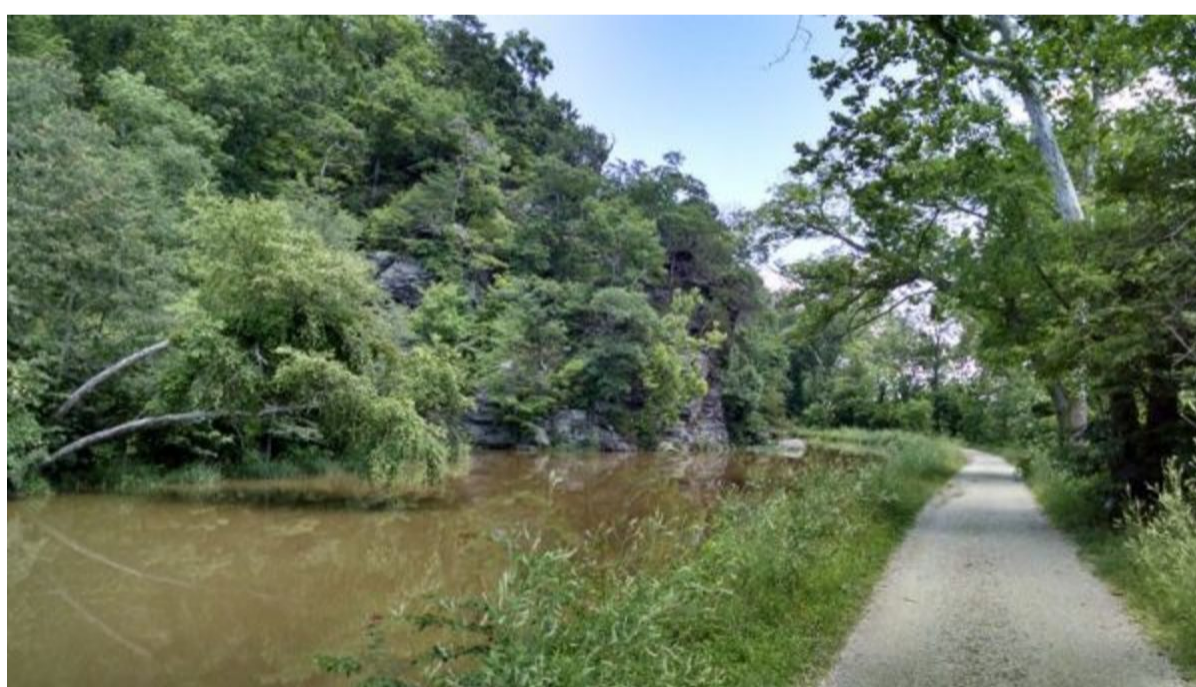
A hike on the trail to a point of land jutting out over the river rewards visitors with a spectacular view of the Potomac, and Virginia on the other side. It had obvious military significance, overlooking the C&O Canal.

The trail also passes the remains of earthworks at the blockhouse site. The men stationed here at this lonely outpost were on guard duty 24 hours a day, seven days a week. In the rain, in the snow, in the cold, on Christmas Day, it didn't matter; security was primary. The soldiers would have struggled in brogans over the jagged rocks here in search of firewood every day or refilling canteens from the nearby spring.

The park has interpretive signs that discuss not only Civil War history but other topics as well. Archaeological finds also are highlighted. Personal items from the blockhouse and campsites have shed light on life here during the war.

Sites like Blockhouse Point Conservation Park allow us to reflect on various topics that don't often make it into our studies of the Civil War, both in the classroom or in the field. Issues of maintaining military discipline in isolated posts, of cooperating with local authorities, of interacting with hostile or indifferent civilians, of Union military policy, and of historic preservation all permeated my mind on the return trip.

For those interested, Blockhouse Point Conservation Park is located off River Road in Montgomery County, Maryland. The park is open daylight hours. Go [here](#) for additional information.



C&O Canal, Blockhouse Point Conservation Park | C&O Canal Trust



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