



## Siege of Suffolk

By Bert Dunkerly, April 20, 2020

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Suffolk Camp of the 6th Massachusetts Infantry, with the outlying Federal earthworks | Library of Congress

Civil War research often focuses on the campaigns in the main theaters: Eastern, Western, and Trans Mississippi. We may also consider sub theaters such as the Carolina coast or Mississippi Valley in our studies. While the large operations and great battles often draw our attention, it is good to reflect on smaller operations as well. They have value as important events in and of themselves, and often impact the larger events which dominate our attention.

In the spring of 1863, the Army of Northern Virginia faced critical food shortages. Lee detached Gen. James Longstreet and two of his division (linking up with a third from North Carolina) to the southeastern part of the state. The goals were to protect Richmond, drive out the Union garrison, and gather supplies. This region had been largely unaffected by the war.

Longstreet's commissary and quartermaster personnel scoured the area, gathering corn, bacon, fodder, and other foodstuffs. The harvest was so successful that wagons, horses, and mules had to be impressed to transport the goods. This part of the operation was a success for the Confederates; the rest, not so much.



View of Suffolk, 1863, *Harper's Weekly*

The siege of Suffolk was not truly a siege in the sense that the Union garrison was never fully cut off—rail and naval support could enter the town freely. Yet being surrounded by a formidable and veteran Confederate force was certainly nerve-racking, and impacted the town's civilians as well.

Suffolk residents were not happy about being occupied (the Federals had arrived in May 1862). Since the town was cut off from the countryside, the Union army supplied civilian needs. Resident Mattie Prentiss wrote, "The Yankees have opened three or four stores. I don't intend to get anything from them." Runaway slaves flocked to the town, further straining resources.

The Union troops initially built a line of defenses around the town shortly after their arrival. Gen. John Peck took command soon after and had them strengthened with Longstreet's approach.

While this engagement might seem insignificant, consider that it involved three Confederate infantry divisions, and an equal number of Federal troops. Union naval forces were active during the entire operation and played a crucial role. The fighting featured artillery bombardments, night action, and river landings. General Peck's troops dug 10 miles of earthworks, Longstreet's men about 12. Peck reported that "not less than ten miles of batteries, covered ways, and rifle pits have been thrown up; most of the artillery was protected by embrasures; the parapets were from 12 to 15 feet in thickness and well revetted, while the covered ways were from 8 to 10 feet."

The most heated part of the action was from April 13 to 15, 1863. General Peck, whose garrison initially consisted of 13,000 troops, gradually was reinforced to nearly 30,000. Longstreet intended to hold the Union troops in place while he gathered supplies from the countryside. Then he hoped to retake the town and capture its defenders.

On April 13, General Hood's division built a battery at Hill's Point overlooking the Nansemond River to block naval supplies from reaching the garrison. Union ships could still pass, but had to contend with Confederate artillery fire.

To counter this move, on the next night Union troops secretly placed their own batteries across the river. The next day they suddenly opened fire and weakened the Confederates occupying Hill's Point. It was a massive artillery exchange.



Gen. James Longstreet | Library of Congress



Gen. John Peck | Library of Congress

In the meantime, General Peck requested both reinforcements, and more importantly, supplies. He noted that they had only 12 days of rations on hand. A few days later he stated that the civilians were suffering, and considered evacuating them. It never came to that.

On the evening of the 19th, nearly 300 Union troops stormed ashore from transports at Hill's Point, capturing the Fauquier Artillery's battery and 130 prisoners. It was an incredibly successful joint army-navy operation.

General Peck wrote that Longstreet "will not succeed." The Confederate forces surrounding Suffolk, never able to fully cut off the garrison, were not strong enough to force its submission. Events elsewhere soon forced Longstreet's hand. As the end of the month approached, Lee needed Longstreet's men back. Lee recalled him on the 29th, and the last Confederates departed on May 4. They arrived just after Chancellorsville.

The action at Suffolk was one of those side operations, of which there were dozens during the war in all theaters. Unfortunately, this engagement has been overshadowed by Chancellorsville.

Modern Suffolk has grown and engulfed much of the site of the siege lines and areas of fighting. Features such as the Nansemond River, major roads, railroad lines, and prominent hills allowed me to compare historic maps and the modern town to see battle positions. In Cedar Hill Cemetery stands an impressive Confederate monument and a Civil War Trails marker.



Confederate Monument, Cedar Hill Cemetery | Courtesy of author

An important surviving site is Riddick's Folley (so named because it was such a large home). Home of businessman and planter Nathaniel Riddick, it was used by General Peck for his headquarters. A view out the second-story windows showed its importance. I could see past the courthouse to the north shore beyond the river, where the Confederates were positioned.



Riddick's Folley | Courtesy of author

Inside Nathaniel Riddick's office is one of the prized artifacts: a letter left by General Peck upon his departure to the homeowner. Acknowledging that he never met Riddick, Peck assured him that he treated his house respectfully and stated that he hoped to meet him under better circumstances. And it was true: The Federal troops did no damage. Upstairs was graffiti by both Northern and Southern soldiers. One Confederate scrawled, "Go back home and stay there."

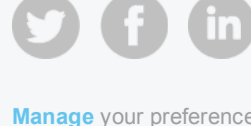
Another soldier from the 93rd New York neatly signed his name.

The Suffolk campaign includes many topics which we could delve into more deeply, any one of which could be fertile for a longer discussion: Union garrison life in southern towns, the impact on southern civilians, foraging and food procurement by the Confederates, army and navy joint operations, contraband camps, etc.



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