

Major Gen. Darius N. Couch



### **Fort Couch**

Washington Heights (called Hummel Heights back in 1863), soldiers and civilians teamed up to build earthwork forts to protect Harrisburg from the Confederate army. This location had the advantage of elevation and a panoramic view of Harrisburg and the surrounding area.

Major General Darius N. Couch, the officer in command of the new Department of the Susquehanna, decided to build a fort on Hummel Heights. Having learned that the War Department in Washington could provide little if any troop support, PA Governor Andrew G. Curtin was already arguing with officers in Washington about the need for federal aid and how best to call volunteers to help repel the expected Confederate invasion.

On June 15, Major James Brady of the 1st Pennsylvania Light Artillery, assisted by Captain Richard I. Dodge of the Regular Army and John Wilson, assistant engineer of the Pennsylvania Railroad, climbed to the top of Hummel Heights. These men clearly saw the need for a fort overlooking the railroad and bridges crossing the Susquehanna River to Harrisburg. While they staked the outline of a fort, officials called for volunteers to help dig earthworks. Clergy in Harrisburg called a mass meeting to help infuse religious fervor into the enterprise. The railroad contributed foremen, digging implements, and wheelbarrows. Late that afternoon, a large crowd of civilians began to dig. Scratching through the thin topsoil, however, they soon hit clay and shale, which made their work slow and difficult. As darkness fell, men set piles of brush on fire to provide enough light to continue digging through the night. The initial enthusiasm, however, soon gave way as blistered hands and weariness slowed the work.

By morning, only a few volunteers were still at it. To complete the earthwork defenses, the Pennsylvania Railroad sent railroad construction gangs. Many of them were African Americans, who were joined by other blacks from the steady stream of refugees fleeing before the advancing Confederates. On June 19, General Couch announced the completion of the fort, which he named Fort Washington.

Only then did Couch realize that Fort Washington, situated at the East end of Hummel Heights, could be dominated by enemy soldiers, who were occupying some slightly higher ground half a mile to the West. Couch ordered construction of a second bastion on this higher ground. Again, railroad construction workers did the bulk of the work, assisted on occasion by soldiers from New York and Pennsylvania militia regiments stationed in the area.

It is unclear whether this second fort, named Fort Couch after the department commander, was ever finished. Surviving references indicate that the bastion was never completed. The surviving portion, next to this historical marker, does indicate a well-constructed earthwork. Both forts were armed with cannon to fire on approaching enemy forces. The steep slopes of the heights meant that the cannon barrels could not be depressed sufficiently to cover the space at the foot of the heights.

In the end, the forts on Hummel Heights were never tested. General Albert G. Jenkins' Confederate cavalry occupied Mechanicsburg on June 28 and advanced out the Trindle Spring Road to Peace Church even as a portion of his brigade moved east along the Carlisle Pike.

After some skirmishing, Jenkins bivouacked near the Rupp House. The next day Jenkins' men again skirmished with the Yankee militia stationed at Oyster Point, creating a diversion that allowed Jenkins to investigate the Union defenses of Harrisburg. General Richard S. Ewell ordered division commander Robert E. Rodes to march his troops toward Harrisburg, overwhelm the defenders, and capture the city. It was his troops who would have assailed Hummel Heights. But the infantry attack never materialized. Learning of the Union army's advance into Pennsylvania, General Robert E. Lee ordered his scattered units to fall back and concentrate west of Gettysburg at Cashtown. On June 30, then, Rodes marched south rather than attack Harrisburg. After the battle of Gettysburg, Forts Couch and Washington were abandoned and largely forgotten as the years slipped by. Today, only a portion of Fort Couch remains to remind local residents of Lee's planned attack on the state capital of Pennsylvania in June of 1863.

The ear-piercing sound of Confederate artillery seemed to reverberate in the very bones of local witnesses. As loud as it was, the Rebel cannon shelling of June 28 and 29, 1863, pointed at one of Harrisburg's defensive positions at Oyster Point, caused little actual damage. Two days of incessant Confederate shelling did, however, mask the Rebel reconnaissance of Harrisburg. This contemporary drawing shows Pennsylvania civilians digging of earthworks on Hummel Heights, a high point on the western bank of the Susquehanna River across from Harrisburg. Traces of those breastworks can still be seen today.

