

SITE HISTORY

BEFORE THE CEMETERY (PRE-1866)

For much of its history prior to 1866, the site of Poplar Grove National Cemetery was an indistinguishable part of a larger forest and Native American homeland, and then in more recent history, a back part of a plantation and farm. Only during the Civil War did the site earn a distinctive use and character—as the camp of the 50th New York Volunteer Engineers, developed between 1864 and 1865. Although the natural topography was influential in determining regional land-use patterns, it is due to the engineers' camp that the cemetery owes its specific location and name.

NATIVE SETTING

The site of Poplar Grove National Cemetery is located at a major geologic and physiographic divide that separates Appalachian highlands of igneous rock to the west, known as the Piedmont Plateau, and sedimentary lowlands to the east, known as the Coastal Plain or its regional idiom, the Tidewater. This divide, traditionally called the Fall Line, extends from New Jersey south to the Carolinas parallel to the Atlantic coast. The Fall Line marks the edge of the Piedmont's east-facing escarpment (cliff), once an ancient ocean shore. The Coastal Plain was formed from sediments that washed down into the ocean from the Plateau and Appalachian highlands over millions of years, eventually building up a sedimentary plain that buried the escarpment and extended far into the sea. As sea levels rose and fell, the plain was alternatively built up and eroded, creating an irregular topography. The name "Fall Line" comes from the waterfalls and rapids that occur as rivers course down the rocky Piedmont escarpment before entering the relatively flat topography of the Coastal Plain. The Fall Line—actually a zone several miles in width rather than a sharp dividing line—marks the westernmost extent of tidal waters.¹

Poplar Grove National Cemetery is just east of the Fall Line within the western extreme of the Coastal Plain. [Figure 1.1] The Fall Line in the region generally corresponds with elevations between 170 and 250 feet, with lower areas part of the Inner Coastal Plain, higher areas as part of the Piedmont Plateau.² Near Poplar Grove, the geology of the Fall Line is most visible in the landscape west of Petersburg along the Appomattox River, a major tributary of the James River that flows into the Chesapeake Bay. Here, the Appomattox (whose name is believed to be of Indian derivation meaning meandering river) cuts through a ravine in the Piedmont escarpment, with waterfalls and rapids extending along a five-mile

stretch west from the city.³ Poplar Grove lies approximately five miles south of these rapids in a region where there is little outward sign of the Fall Line because the Piedmont escarpment is buried beneath Coastal Plain sediments. The topography here overall slopes toward the east, with local changes in elevation typically amounting to less than fifty feet. Poplar Grove lies above a small ravine in the headwaters of the Arthur Swamp, near a significant watershed divide. The streams to the north of the cemetery drain to the Appomattox River and the Chesapeake Bay, while those adjoining and to the south of the cemetery, including the Arthur Swamp, drain to the Nottoway and Chowan Rivers that flow into the Albemarle Sound in North Carolina. The siege line built by the Union Army along present-day Flank Road approximately one half mile north of the cemetery generally marks the line of this watershed divide.⁴

Due to extensive clearing by European settlers, little is known about the native plant species and communities that existed in and around Poplar Grove National Cemetery. The soils, generally composed of deep loamy and clayey river and marine deposits, would have supported a temperate forest ecosystem.⁵ The area was most likely dominated by longleaf pine (*Pinus palustris*) and mixed hardwoods such as American beech (*Fagus grandifolia*), several species of oak (*Quercus spp.*), and American holly (*Ilex opaca*). Poplars—the indirect namesake for the cemetery—were probably part of the native flora in the Petersburg area, especially along bottomlands. Tulip poplar (*Liriodendron tulipifera*) is a common early successional tree in the Fall Zone. Loblolly pine (*Pinus taeda*)—a tree common today in the woods surrounding Poplar Grove—was generally a minor species, often found in mixed hardwood forests and along stream and swamp margins.⁶ When European farmers began to clear the native forests beginning in the late seventeenth century, loblolly pine often became the dominant species due to its ability to quickly regenerate in disturbed areas. This nature led to its nickname, “old-field pine.”⁸

Human habitation in the region surrounding Poplar Grove National Cemetery, referred to as the “Apamatica Country” by European explorers and traders after the people who lived in the region at the time of contact in the seventeenth century, dates back more than 10,000 years. At the time of European contact, the region was a border area for several Native peoples, with a primary trading path running along the Fall Line. Within Dinwiddie County, Eastern Siouion Indians (branch of the Western Sioux) lived in the western part of the county, Southern Iroquois in the south, and in the east lived the Appomattox (or Appamatuck) tribe who were part of the Algonquian speaking Powhatan confederation that extended east to the Chesapeake Bay. The Appomattox and other Algonquian-speaking peoples in Virginia built bark-covered houses in villages enclosed by

palisades, and in surrounding fields farmed corn, beans, melons, pumpkins, root vegetables, and fruit trees.⁹ While the Appomattox would have considered the site of Poplar Grove to be part of their homeland, it is not known whether they or any other earlier Native peoples had any specific use or association with the forested site, which was most likely part of larger hunting grounds.

EUROPEAN SETTLEMENT

Soon after European settlers established Jamestown in 1607, they began to explore the headwaters of the James River, which were navigable up to the Fall Line. They arrived in Apamatica Country in 1608, but it was several decades before settlement reached that far west. In 1639, the first patent was granted at the falls of the Appomattox River (Fall Line), within the present city of Petersburg. Six years later in anticipation of further settlement, the English colony authorized Fort Henry to be constructed there as part of a series of forts along the Fall Line to defend the western edge of settlement. In 1644, the Powhatan Confederation signed a treaty agreeing that all land east of the Fall Line belonged to the English, and all land to the west was Indian territory. South of the Appomattox River, the so-called Indian Line was poorly defined, and English settlement began to occur well to its west. By the end of the seventeenth century, the Appomattox and most of the Powhatan peoples in the region had been decimated by European diseases, war, and cultural pressures. The Indian Line gave way in 1690.¹⁰

The region of the Appomattox River at present-day Petersburg remained a remote outpost to the colony of Virginia for years following the establishment of Fort Henry in 1644, but with the dissolution of the Indian Line, settlement began in earnest. Land in the region, part of Charles City County, was typically granted to Europeans through patents, most of which near Petersburg were granted between 1715 and 1730. By 1702, settlement had advanced sufficiently in the region to warrant subdivision of a new county, Prince George County. Maps made at mid-century illustrate settlement clustered along the major rivers. [Figure 1.2] By 1752, the western half of the county was set off as present-day Dinwiddie County, named after Robert Dinwiddie who had been appointed Lieutenant Governor of Virginia the year before.¹¹

Petersburg, located at the northeastern corner of Dinwiddie County, developed as the primary trade and market center for the surrounding agricultural region. First envisaged in 1733 as a city near the site of Fort Henry, Petersburg was not laid out until 1748. By 1784, however, it had developed sufficiently along with several surrounding communities to warrant incorporation as a town, reaching a population of nearly 3,000 by 1791. Much of its early growth was due to the tobacco trade and its position at the head of navigable waters on the Appomattox

River. A visitor to Petersburg during the Revolution recorded: "...the principal trade of Petersburg arises from the exporting of tobacco, deposited in warehouses and magazines...up to which sloops, schooners, and small vessels continually sail."¹²

Much of Dinwiddie County outside of Petersburg surrounding the future site of Poplar Grove National Cemetery remained sparsely developed through the first half of the nineteenth century. In 1830, for example, the population of the 500 square-mile county was 13,579, of which 8,322 lived in Petersburg; more than half, 7,506, were slaves. As was typical of most of Tidewater Virginia, agriculture was based on the plantation system, initially for tobacco. As soils wore out from tobacco growing, fields were either abandoned to succession (often regenerating in loblolly pine), or were planted with different crops, including wheat and corn. As soils became depleted and more fertile farming regions opened up in the Midwest, the value of the county's farms dropped by more than one-half between 1820 and 1850.¹³ These depressed conditions were evident in a description of the county written by the widely published journalist Benson J. Lossing during his visit in 1848:

...the country is broken, and patches of sandy soil with pine forests, alternated with red clay, bearing oaks, chestnuts, and gum-trees. Worse roads I never expect to travel, for they would be impassable...The country is sparsely populated, and the plantations generally bore evidences of unskilled culture. Although most of the soil is fertile, and might be made very productive, yet so wretchedly is it frequently managed that twenty bushels of wheat is considered a good yield for an acre...Tobacco is the staple product, yielding from five hundred to one thousand pounds per acre; but in the absence of manure, it destroys the vitality of the soil.¹⁴

With increasing access to markets and improved agricultural practices, however, farming in Dinwiddie County was beginning to improve at the time of Lossing's visit. By 1860, land values had almost doubled, and improved farm acreage had increased, but the county remained sparsely developed.¹⁵ Roads were generally far between, and even the primary roads, such as Halifax Road leading due south from Petersburg and the Road to Dinwiddie Court House leading southwest to the county seat, were little more than dirt tracks through the early part of the nineteenth century. Roads generally extended perpendicular to streams and were oriented in a radial pattern towards Petersburg, the market center.¹⁶

The antebellum years were prosperous ones for Petersburg, which was incorporated as a city in 1850 and by the eve of the Civil War became ranked only behind Richmond among Virginia cities in its size, industry, and cultural life.¹⁷ Much of its growth and importance became increasingly tied to its position as a transportation crossroads. Although early on improvements were made to navigation on the Appomattox River, perhaps most important to the future strategic importance of Petersburg were the roads and railroads, which made the city a key link between vast agricultural regions to the south and industries in Richmond and points north. In 1833, the Petersburg Railroad (later renamed the Petersburg and Weldon Railroad, and then the Petersburg and Roanoke Railroad) was completed to North Carolina, reinforcing Petersburg's importance as an agricultural market and industrial center, and soon additional rail links were built to Richmond, Norfolk on the Chesapeake Bay, and City Point at the confluence of the Appomattox and James Rivers.¹⁸ By mid-century, there was growing demand for improved roads, leading to the construction of the Boydton Plank Road leading southwest on the earlier alignment of the Road to Dinwiddie Court House, and the Jerusalem Plank Road that extended southeast to Norfolk. On the eve of the Civil War, five railroads and six major roads converged on Petersburg from all directions.¹⁹ [Figure 1.3]

The Flower Farm

As was typical of cities and villages throughout the nation prior to the Civil War, Petersburg remained a compact urban area, extending little more than a mile south from the banks of the Appomattox River. Beyond this were extensive areas of second-growth pine forest (many probably originally cleared for growing tobacco, then abandoned), swamps, and agricultural land associated with farms and large plantations. Houses were few and far between. The site of Poplar Grove National Cemetery was in a rural area approximately five miles southwest of the center of Petersburg just east of Vaughan Road, a secondary road that branched southwest off Halifax Road. [Figure 1.4] By 1829, the Globe Tavern, one of the few commercial establishments outside of Petersburg, existed on Halifax Road approximately a half mile due east of the cemetery site, and there were two houses farther north on the road. During the 1840s and 1850s, additional houses and roads were built in the area, apparently due to subdivision of the large plantations into smaller farms. Due west of the cemetery site, a small church, named Poplar Spring Church, was constructed along a cross road (present Fort Emory Road) between Vaughan Road and the parallel-running Squirrel Level Road to the west.

On the eve of the Civil War, the site of the cemetery occupied the southern edge of a 450-acre farm along Vaughan Road, one and a half miles south of the intersection with Halifax Road. Because of a fire at the Dinwiddie County

Courthouse that destroyed all land records prior to c.1835, little is known about the earliest ownership of the land. By the early nineteenth century, it was apparently part of a large plantation known as the Clifford Tract that extended from the vicinity of Arthurs Swamp and Duncan Road (present Route 670) on the west to beyond Vaughan Road on the east. At this time, the plantation belonged to Jordon and Francis Floyd. They lived in a two-story frame dwelling later known as Cottage Place, located east of Duncan Road toward the west end of the plantation. Jordon Floyd was a bonded tobacco inspector for Oaks warehouse in Petersburg.²⁰

In 1838, the Floyds—then residents of Petersburg—sold the eastern end of the plantation along Vaughan Road. On June 4th of that year, the Floyds together with their trustee, Benjamin Johnson, sold a 450-acre tract to either side of Vaughan Road and including the future cemetery site to Benjamin H. and Frances Coupland for \$2,612.33. At the same time, the Floyds also sold a 386-acre tract to the south to Jeremiah Whitehead.²¹

The Couplands were most likely the first owners of the property as an independent farm or plantation, apparently adding a farmhouse and other appurtenances. The Couplands only owned the 450-acre farm for five years; on March 21, 1843, they sold it to Isaac Roney, of Dinwiddie County, for \$1,200 (less than half the value of the previous purchase, probably due to the seven-year depression that followed the panic of 1837).²² Less than a year later on September 30, 1844, Roney and his wife Mary sold the farm to Joseph A. Sydnor, of Petersburg, for \$2,000. Over their eight years of ownership, Sydnor and his wife Mary apparently rented out the farm, since they remained residents of Petersburg. On December 2, 1852, the Sydnors sold the farm to Juliana Dorsey, for \$3,000. Dorsey, who was unmarried, sold the farm a year and a half later on March 21, 1855 to John Flower, of Delaware County, Pennsylvania, for \$6,750.²³ In order to pay for the property, John Flower used a \$5,000 bond that was issued by Reverend Thomas B. Flower, probably John's father or brother. At the time, Reverend Flower was serving a church in Barnstable County, Massachusetts, but was from the Philadelphia area, probably also Delaware County. John was apparently unable to pay off this bond, and so he and his wife sold the farm to Reverend Flower on April 25, 1856, just a year after they had acquired the farm. Reverend Flower paid \$7,888.43, more than one thousand dollars over the previous sale price, indicating the sale was most likely a measure of financial assistance to John and Mary Ann.²⁴

Little is known about why the Flowers purchased the 450-acre farm along Vaughan Road. The agricultural economy in Dinwiddie County was flourishing

by the 1850s, and perhaps they saw an opportunity there that they may not have had in Pennsylvania. They made the farm their home, and apparently resided in the farmhouse that was probably built by the Couplands in c.1838, which was located on the west side of Vaughan Road.²⁵ Even though they legally did not own the property after they sold it in 1856 to Reverend Flower, John and Mary Ann Flower remained the occupants of the farm through the Civil War.²⁶

Into the early years of the Civil War, the site of the cemetery within the Flower farm was most likely a four or five-acre field surrounded on three sides by woods of loblolly pine, second-growth trees that had seeded in earlier in the century after the land had been clear cut and farmed.²⁷ The field, which adjoined another field to the south on land owned by the Farley family, occupied a plateau that bordered shallow ravines to the north and west formed by headwaters of the Arthur Swamp. The pine woods separated the field from other fields to the west along Vaughan Road, and more pine woods extended west to Halifax Road. The nearby marshy ravine floors were probably covered in mixed bottomland hardwood trees, such as maple and poplar.²⁸

THE CIVIL WAR

The transformation of a corner of the Flower farm to a military camp and ultimately the resting place for thousands and thousands of fallen soldiers is of course intimately linked with the Civil War. Petersburg was the site of a terrible ten-month long siege known as the Petersburg Campaign that began in June 1864 and continued into April 1865—the longest siege in American warfare. Following failed attempts in the spring of 1864 at taking Richmond directly, General Grant changed to a strategy of indirectly taking the Confederate capitol by cutting off its supply routes, the most important of which came through Petersburg with its nexus of road and rail lines. After an initial four-day battle from June 15th to the 18th failed to take Petersburg, General Grant turned to siege operations of encirclement and attrition. With headquarters and major supply center at City Point east of Petersburg, the Union Army built an extensive line of siege fortifications from June 19, 1864 through the winter of 1865, extending in an arc around the city for more than ten miles through Prince George and Dinwiddie Counties. [Figure 1.5] Confronted in the spring with near encirclement, the Confederate Army fled Petersburg on the night of April 2, 1865, and retreated west along the Appomattox River. One week later, on April 9, 1865, General Lee surrendered at Appomattox Court House.²⁹

While the story of the Petersburg Campaign does not need to be retold here in detail, there are parts that are important in understanding the history of the cemetery landscape, since its development during the Civil War as a military camp led directly to its establishment as a national cemetery. Two weeks after the

initial opening battle at Petersburg, the Union Army had extended its siege line beyond the Jerusalem Plank Road, the main road running southeast toward Southampton County in southeastern Virginia [see Figure 1.5]. They continued to advance farther south and west, extending timber and earthen siege fortifications toward the Petersburg & Weldon Railroad, the main rail line from the south. On August 18-21, 1864, the Union Army captured the rail line at Globe Tavern in the Battle of the Weldon Railroad. They fortified the location by building Fort Wadsworth, which closed off Halifax Road. At the same time, the Union Army began building a military railroad from Pitkin Station on the eastern front at present-day Fort Lee, to the Weldon Railroad, in order to speed supplies for the extension of siege lines farther west.³⁰

On September 29, 1864, the Union Army gained control of territory two miles to the west in the Battle of Peebles Farm, also known as the Battle of Poplar Spring Church. [Figure 1.6] By October 2nd, they had extended the siege lines to Peebles Farm, following high ground formed by the watershed divide. By November, the Union Army had completed an extension of the military railroad to Patrick Station near Peebles Farm, requiring clearing through dense pine forests. [Figure 1.7] From here, troops and supplies were brought in to extend the siege fortifications still further west toward the Boydton Plank Road (Road to Dinwiddie Court House). Peebles Farm became the main Union camp, centered at Fort Wheaton less than one mile south of the Confederate front line. Near here, a signal tower was erected to facilitate communications in the ongoing construction of the encircling fortifications, known as the Federal Left Flank. Unimpeded by major battles, the Union Army completed these fortifications, today known as the Fish Hook Siegeworks, during the winter of 1864-1865, along with a parallel secondary line to the south that created a Federal zone of occupation [see Figure 1.5].³¹

The war and in particular the construction of the siege lines had a devastating impact on a broad swath of landscape. Fields were destroyed, forests slashed, and extensive areas were excavated for the construction of a wide variety of military structures built of earth and timber. [Figure 1.8] The soft, deep soils of river and marine deposition proved easily workable and helped speed construction of the fortifications. Camps for the troops were set up within the occupied zones, with canvas tents as well as more permanent structures built of logs harvested from the extensive slashing operations. [Figure 1.9]

The Engineers' Camp

Building the Federal Left Flank—the fortifications extending west from the Weldon Railroad—became the charge of the 50th New York Volunteer Engineers.

Originally organized in Elmira, New York in 1861 as an infantry regiment drawing recruits primarily from central and western parts of upstate New York and northern Pennsylvania, the regiment was soon reorganized as an engineer battalion under the Army of the Potomac Engineers.³² In late October 1864, two months after the Battle of Weldon Railroad, Engineers Company L and Company M (probably later followed by other companies including Company F) relocated their camp to the Flower farm, to a spot within the Federal zone of occupation due west of the Globe Tavern between Vaughan Road and Halifax Road, roughly a half-mile south of the siege line and over a mile and a half east of the main Union camp at Fort Wheaton. [Figure 1.10] The main road to the camp was probably from the north in the direction of the military railroad. The road cut across small ravines and wetlands, requiring the construction of earthen causeways.³³ A second road probably entered from the southwest from Vaughan Road. Initial development of the camp was mostly with rudimentary structures such as tents because the engineers were busy with constructing the siege line fortifications. After November 1864, there was a lull that allowed the engineers to focus on improving their camp. Then on March 29, 1865, they broke camp to take part in the final offensive against the Confederate defense of Petersburg, four days before General Lee fled the city.³⁴

The 50th New York Volunteer Engineers apparently selected the Flower farm as the site for their camp for purposes of convenience—nearness to their work on the Federal Left Flank.³⁵ The specific location, however, may have been influenced by other factors, since there were certainly other sites as convenient to the work on the fortifications or the main transportation line of the military railroad. Nearness to the winter quarters of the Sixth Corps, apparently located to the north, may have been a factor.³⁶ Perhaps the site—a level field surrounded on three sides by pine forest and ravines—provided some cover and concealment. Another possible reason could be that the Flower family—Northerners from the Philadelphia area—may have offered the site to the engineers.³⁷ The site may have also been attractive due to its proximity to Fort Clarke, a pentagonal earthen fortification in the rear lines that was approximately one thousand feet south of the camp [see Figure 1.10].

Numerous photographs and two drawings provide details on the appearance and development of the camp between October 1864 and March 1865. It was organized in a rectilinear plan, with the main officer quarters and hospital on the west, officer quarters and barracks on the east, and an open parade ground in the center with a chapel at its north end [see Drawing 1]. The entry road from the north branched, one leg leading to the hospital and officers' quarters and the other to the barracks. Overall length of the camp proper from east to west was less than five hundred feet, and from north to south, approximately three

hundred feet—an area smaller than later enclosed by the cemetery walls.³⁸ The buildings were all constructed out of unmilled timber, most likely cut from the surrounding loblolly pine forests. Many of the buildings were highly ornamented in the rustic style, then fashionable in public parks and pleasure grounds of country estates in the engineers' native Northeast.³⁹ By 1864, the engineers had developed a keen ability to work with raw timber, gained from their wartime experience of building wooden bridges, boats, fortifications, and camp buildings.

The main officer quarters, centered on a courtyard off the west side of the parade grounds (west of existing cemetery flagstaff), were the most elaborately designed in the camp aside from the church. In its initial development in the fall of 1864, the area was comprised of four small officer tents facing north and south into the courtyard, and a headquarters tent on the east side of the courtyard, facing the parade grounds. Each tent was approximately six feet wide by twelve feet deep, and featured cloth roofs, brick chimneys, and log sidewalls. The tent facades were made of a timber frame or lattice, on which evergreen boughs were twined and shaped, as in a wreath or topiary. [Figure 1.11] The headquarters tent was the most decorative, featuring a double Gothic-arched entrance complete with pilasters and the U. S. Army Corps of Engineers insignia, executed in relief of clipped evergreen. [Figure 1.12] The courtyard was delineated by an evergreen hedge, which was apparently made of cut young evergreen trees or boughs staked in the ground. North of here was the surgeon's office, along with hospital and ambulance corps buildings.

During the lull in construction of the siege fortifications in the late fall and winter of 1864-1865, the engineers rebuilt the main officer quarters—most likely the evergreen facades and hedge had turned brown within a few weeks. Initial work on the improvements was documented by J. W. Austin, who drew a perspective of the camp looking southwest in the winter of 1865, probably showing conditions in January. [Figure 1.13] The drawing shows the Colonel's Quarters in place of the headquarters tent, and a new Surgeon's Quarters to the north. Over the next few months, another three matching buildings would be built around the courtyard. These officer quarters buildings were executed in a remarkably detailed rustic style, with shingled roofs, twig and bark sheathing, details made of saplings, and glazed six-light windows. [Figure 1.14] Each of the four officer quarters, measuring approximately twelve feet wide by fifteen feet long, featured a pedimented façade with alternating twig and unbarked log facing and a central entrance, connected by lattice archways to the adjoining building. [Figure 1.15] The Colonel's Quarters was a longer structure—about thirty feet north to south—with a projecting central wing with an arched entrance. [Figure 1.16] In place of the evergreen hedges, a rustic lattice fence enclosed the new courtyard.

Each of the buildings was connected by a corduroy (log) walk and lattice fences and archways. To the north, a hedge-enclosed yard, with a rustic entrance arch and flagstaff at the entry road, was added in front of the ambulance corps and hospital buildings.⁴⁰

As work was underway on improving the officer quarters, the engineers were also building a new focal point for the camp—a chapel and meeting hall. Most likely begun in February 1865, the building was located on the north side of the parade grounds along a central axis, near the officer quarters (directly north of existing cemetery flagstaff).⁴¹ [Figure 1.17] The engineers dedicated the church to the congregation of the nearby Poplar Spring Chapel (or Meeting House), which at the time was occupied by the Union Army since its victory at the Battle of Peebles Farm (Battle of Poplar Spring Church) on September 29-October 1, 1864. The building, known as Poplar Grove Church (for an unknown reason “Grove” was substituted for “Spring”), was dedicated by Reverend Mr. Duryea of New York on March 5, 1865. It served both recreational and religious purposes, hosting Sunday services as well as minstrel shows and concerts, which were attended not only by the engineers, but also by visiting dignitaries that included Mrs. General Grant and Mrs. General Meade. The church was lastly used as a hospital in the final days of the Petersburg Campaign.⁴²

The Gothic, rustic-style church was designed by Captain Michael H. McGrath, who commanded the engineers’ Company F. McGrath designed the building in the plan of a cross, measuring approximately fifty to sixty feet long and roughly half as deep, capable of seating an estimated two hundred and twenty-five people.⁴³ The entire structure was built of timber and featured a central tower with a spire that reached nearly sixty feet in height, shingled gable roofs with ridge ventilators, timber end chimneys, and unbarked log siding. The main entrance, a Gothic-arched opening with recessed plank doors, was in the base of the tower, and four floor-length windows lined the façade, each with twig-lattice for muntins. The tower featured two square base stages that tapered to an octagonal lantern with diamond-shaped twig-work in place of windows. From here rose a spire topped by a mast. The tower and spire were sheathed in intricate twig detailing that included the Corps of Engineers insignia. Upon completion, the church windows were apparently glazed with oilcloth or paper. [Figure 1.18] Inside, an inscription over the pulpit dedicated the building to the members of Poplar Spring Church.⁴⁴

Due east of the church was the officer quarters for Company L, a log building with a cross-gable on axis with the church. [Figure 1.19, see also Drawing 2] South of it was the officer quarters for Company M, a similar, but smaller building. Both were relatively plain in comparison with the main officer buildings across the

parade ground. On the opposite side of a central walk that extended across the parade ground were the barracks, shown on the perspective sketch made in the winter of 1865 [see Figure 1.13]. The northern two rows of barracks, each consisting of seven connected log cabins with gable roofs, belonged to Company L. To the south were two additional rows of barracks, but these consisted of long, gabled buildings rather than small cabins. East of the barracks were the company's cook houses, a well, and a washhouse, and to the south was a storage area for pontoon boats and a guard house at the south end of the parade grounds. The engineers may have also planted an orchard in the vicinity.⁴⁵ A later drawing of the camp, probably made in March 1865, shows many additional rows of barracks extending to the south of the Company L and M barracks, probably including barracks for Company F, to which the architect of the church belonged. [Figure 1.20; see also Appendix A] These barracks were enclosed by a log rail fence and evergreen hedges, and was accessed by plank walks.⁴⁶

Aftermath

On the morning of April 3, 1865, Union troops entered Petersburg in the wake of General Lee's retreat toward Appomattox the previous night. By 10:00 a.m., President Lincoln arrived on the battlefield via the Military Railroad, stopping near the Jerusalem Plank Road and then touring the ravaged Union siege lines south of the city, but not visiting the engineers' camp.⁴⁷ Petersburg entered a long period of occupation by the Union Army.

The combination of fortification construction and battle scars devastated the landscape around Petersburg. For many months following Lee's retreat, the Union siege-line fortifications lay abandoned. Local residents, strapped for building materials and income, scoured the battlefield, retrieving lead from bullets, timber from the fortifications, and iron from the Military Railroad. Some began to return the battlefields to agriculture. The feeling of death—marked not just by the physical destruction but also by bodies left scattered on the battlefield—permeated the landscape.⁴⁸

For at least five months after General Lee's surrender in April 1865, the engineers' camp apparently remained intact. In late September 1865, John Trowbridge, a Northerner, wrote the following description of the camp for his book, *The Desolate South*:

Passing the winter quarters of the Sixth Corps, we approached one of the most beautiful villages ever seen. It was sheltered by a grove of murmuring pines. An arched gateway admitted us to its silent streets. It was constructed entirely of pine saplings and logs. Even

the neat sidewalks were composed of the same material. The huts—if those little dwellings, built in a unique and perfect style of architecture, may be called by that humble name—were furnished with bedrooms and mantelpieces within, and plain columns and fluted pilasters without, all of rough pine. The plain columns were formed of single bark on, of course. The walls were similarly constructed. The village was deserted and with the exception of a safeguard, consisting of half a dozen United States soldiers, stationed there to protect it from vandalism.

The gem of the place was the church. Its walls, pillars, pointed arches and spire, one hundred feet high, were composed entirely of pines selected and arranged with surprising taste and skill. The pulpit was in keeping with the rest. Above it was the following inscription: “Presented to the members of Poplar Spring Church by the 50th N. Y. V. Engineers. Capt. M. H. McGrath, architect.”⁴⁹

Over the course of the following nine months, all of the camp was disassembled except for Poplar Grove Church, which became a refuge for freed slaves who held their meetings in the building, and several log barracks that may have been at the entrance from Vaughan Road.⁵⁰ Little is known about the fate of the ornate officers quarters or any of the other buildings and camp infrastructure. Some of the buildings may have been temporarily moved to the adjoining woods and fields while plans were being developed for the camp’s new use—as a cemetery for Union soldiers.⁵¹

ENDNOTES

¹ Keith Frye, *Roadside Geology of Virginia* (Missoula, Montana: Mountain Press Publishing Company, 1986), 1-2, 83-85. Today, geologists use the term Fall Zone, because the divide is typically a broad area of several miles in width (rather than a strict line), typically marked by westernmost extent of tidal waters.

² Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation. “The Natural Communities of Virginia, Classification of Ecological Community Groups, Second Approximation (Version 2.1), section “General Setting,” online article at <http://www.dcr.virginia.gov/dnh/ncoverview.htm>; U. S. Department of Agriculture Natural Resource Conservation Service in cooperation with Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, *Soil Survey of Dinwiddie Area, Virginia* (N.p.: USDA, August 1996), 4.

³ U.S.G.S., Petersburg Quadrangle, 1969 revised 1987; Richard L. Jones, *Dinwiddie County: Carrefour of the Commonwealth* (Dinwiddie, Virginia: Dinwiddie County Board of Supervisors, 1976), 112.

⁴ Jones, 35; USGS Petersburg Quadrangle.

⁵ *Soil Survey of Dinwiddie Area, Virginia*, 34, 41.

⁶ “The Natural Communities of Virginia,” sections “The Coastal Plain,” “The Piedmont Plateau.”

⁷ Robert Schultz, *Loblolly Pine: The Ecology and Culture of Loblolly Pine* (U. S. Department of Agriculture, Handbook 713, December 1997), part 1, page 5.

⁸ “The Natural Communities of Virginia,” “The Piedmont Plateau.”

⁹ Jones, 5-6, 37; George Percy Journal of May 26, 1607 cited in Conway Whittle Sams, *The Conquest of Virginia, Second Attempt* (Norfolk: Keiser & Doherty, 1929), cited in Roger Charles Sherry, “Cultural Landscape Report for the Federal Left Flank and Fish Hook Siegeworks” (National Park Service Olmsted Center for Landscape Preservation, October 2004), 11.

¹⁰ Jones, 10, 13, 15, 32-35.

¹¹ Jones, 39-40.

¹² Thomas Anburey, *Travels in the Interior Parts of America* (1776-1781), quoted in Writers’ Program of the Work Projects Administration in the State of Virginia, *Virginia: A Guide to the Old Dominion* (New York: Oxford Press, 1940), 275.

¹³ Workers of the Writers’ Program of the Works Projects Administration in the State of Virginia, *Dinwiddie County “The Countrey of the Apamatica”* (Richmond: Whittet & Shepperson for Dinwiddie County School Board, 1942), 164.

¹⁴ Benson Lossing, quoted in *Dinwiddie County “The Countrey of the Apamatica”* 115-117.

¹⁵ *Dinwiddie County “The Countrey of the Apamatica”*, 165.

¹⁶ Jones, 39.

¹⁷ *Virginia: A Guide to the Old Dominion*, 275; John Trowbridge, ed. Gordon Carroll, *The Desolate South 1865-1866* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce-Little, Brown and Company, 1956), 113-114.

¹⁸ Jones, 132-133.

¹⁹ Sherry, 13.

²⁰ Jones, 213-214; “Abstract of title to land upon which is located Poplar Grove U. S. National Cemetery” c.1866, (copy; see Appendix B), RG 92, Records of the Quartermaster General, Entry 576, Poplar Grove National Cemetery Records, National Archives I, Washington, D.C. [hereafter, “Poplar Grove Records, NARA I”], box 57.

²¹ Jordon and Francis Floyd and Benjamin Johnson to Benjamin Coupland, book 2, page 119, and Floyds to Jeremiah Whitehead, book 2, page 122 (Dinwiddie County Land Records on microfilm through Library of Virginia). The Coupland parcel was surveyed at 453 acres; this was later resurveyed to 450 acres. On June 4, 1838, the same day as the deed, Benjamin Coupland signed a “Deed of Trust” in the property to Edward L. Pegram and Benjamin Johnson (trustees to the Floyds) in order to use bonds to pay for the property. Book 2, page 121.

²² Dinwiddie County Land Records, book 3, page 578. This deed from Coupland to Roney describes the property as lying on both sides of Vaughan’s Road, and referenced that the deed included the “said tract of land, together with the premises and appurtenances thereto.” The deed from the Floyds to Coupland did not reference premises or appurtenances on the land.

²³ Dinwiddie County Land Records, book 4, page 529; book 7, page 273; book 8, page 270.

²⁴ Dinwiddie County Land Records, book 7, page 271, book 8, page 275, book 8, page 522, book 8, page 523, and book 9, page 221. The trustees included Robert H. Mann, John Mann, and Thomas Branch. Thomas Britton Flower also employed a bond to pay for the property; his final release of deed for the property was signed on August 11, 1857. In a letter dated June 12, 1866 to Major General Meigs, Lt. Col. James Moore referred to the owner of the cemetery property—Rev. Flower—as a “gentleman from Philadelphia” (Delaware County adjoins Philadelphia). Poplar Grove Records, NARA I, box 57.

²⁵ The residence of “J. B. Flower” is shown on the west side of Vaughan Road on T. R. Rives, “Map of Dinwiddie County VA 1878” (traced by F. M. Lundahl, 1935), republished in Jones, back inside cover.

²⁶ The farm is identified as belonging to “John Flowers” [sic] on the “Plan of the Locality of U. S. Nat. Cemetery at Poplar Grove. Va.” (Surveyed by G. H. Thomason, C. E., c.1866), Poplar Grove Records, NARA I, box 57.

²⁷ Photographs in the Library of Congress taken in the late fall of 1864 when the Camp of the 50th New York Volunteer Engineers was just being set up do not show tree stumps or substantial ground disturbance in the open center of the camp that would indicate the area had been recently cleared of trees. These photographs do show loblolly pine woods along the west and north perimeters of the camp. These pine woods are indicated on the c.1866 “Plan of the Locality of U. S. Nat. Cemetery at Poplar Grove. Va.”

²⁸ Schultz, 5.

²⁹ National Park Service, Petersburg National Battlefield park brochure (Government Printing Office, 2003); Herbert Olsen, “Poplar Grove National Cemetery History” (Unpublished report prepared for the National Park Service, 31 May 1954), 11-13.

³⁰ Olsen, 20-21.

³¹ Sherry, 30-41.

³² Frederick Phisterer, *New York in the War of the Rebellion*, cited in “50th Engineer Regiment Civil War,” New York State Military Museum and Veterans Research Center webpage, dmna.state.ny.us/historic/reghist/civil/other/50thEng/50thEngMain/htm.

³³ The 1864-65 Michler survey does not show the engineers’ camp or roads leading to it. The existence of a road leading north is based on the Hastings drawing of the engineers camp (see Appendix A) and by a causeway indicated through the ravine floor to the north of the cemetery on the c.1866 “Plan of the Locality of U. S. Nat. Cemetery at Poplar Grove” (see Figure 2.4).

³⁴ Olsen, 20.

³⁵ Olsen, 20.

³⁶ Trowbridge, 117. Trowbridge describes passing the winter quarters of the Sixth Corps on his way to the engineers’ camp from the Weldon Railroad.

³⁷ The owner of the Flower Farm, Rev. Thomas Britton Flower, purportedly offered the same property to the federal government in 1866 for the site of Poplar Grove National Cemetery.

³⁸ The perspective drawing of the camp made by J. W. Austin during the winter of 1865 shows only four rows of barracks on the west side, while the drawing by C. E. Hastings (c.1865) shows fifteen or more rows of barracks to the east of Poplar Grove Church [Hastings drawing in Appendix A].

³⁹ The rustic style had its origins in the movement for scenic preservation that began in the 1840s, and in the English landscape gardening tradition, with its interest in follies. For example, the pioneering landscape designer Andrew Jackson Downing recommended use of the rustic style in wooded, naturalistic landscapes in his 1865 work, *A Treatise on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening, Adapted to North America; With a View to the Improvement of Country Residences* (New York: Dover Publications reprint, 1991), see page 32.

⁴⁰ Hastings drawing (c.1865).

⁴¹ Olsen, 22. Although Olsen cites February 1865 as the date construction was begun on the church, the building may have been constructed in the late fall. A photograph of the church in the Library of Congress, showing the building substantially complete except for window coverings, is dated “November 1864” (photograph LC-DIG-cwpb-02852).

⁴² Olsen, 22, 24-25.

⁴³ The Petersburg *Advertiser*, referenced in Olsen, 23.

⁴⁴ Trowbridge, 117; Sherry, 47.

⁴⁵ W. H. Owen, Office of the Inspector General, “Report of Inspection of Poplar Grove. (18 April 1885), Poplar Grove Records, NARA I, box 57.

⁴⁶ This Hastings perspective drawing shows many details, but the perspective appears to be highly distorted and the details do not all agree with period photographs. No additional documentation was found that supports the details of this perspective.

⁴⁷ Sherry, 45-46.

⁴⁸ Sherry, 45-47.

⁴⁹ Trowbridge, 117.

⁵⁰ Superintendent August Miller to Brevet Lt. Col. James M. Moore, 15 October 1867, and August Miller entry for 30 November 1869, Poplar Grove Correspondence database (1867), Poplar Grove National Cemetery, Petersburg National Battlefield.

⁵¹ The earliest known survey of Poplar Grove National Cemetery entitled “Plan of the Locality of U. S. Nat. Cemetery at Poplar Grove. Va.” made in c.1866 [see Figure 1.23] shows eighteen buildings scattered in a haphazard manner around the periphery of the cemetery where earlier maps showed none, suggesting they may have been temporarily relocated camp buildings.

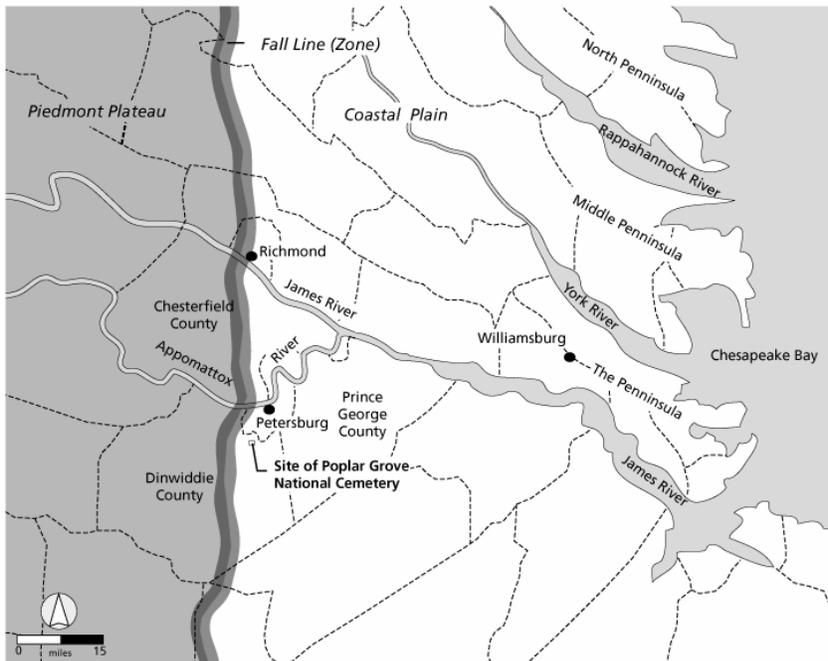


Figure 1.1: Physiographic regions illustrating general area of the Fall Line (Fall Zone) in relationship to Poplar Grove National Cemetery and current county boundaries. SUNY ESF based on Woodward and Hoffman (1991), reproduced on Virginia Department of Recreation and Conservation website, <http://www.dcr.virginia.gov/dnh/ncoverview.htm>.



Figure 1.2: Detail, "Map of the Most Inhabited Part of Virginia (Fry & Jefferson, 1751), showing Petersburg and future site of Poplar Grove. Note lack of roads and settlement in area south of Petersburg. Library of Congress, American Memory Collection website, g3880 ct000370, annotated by SUNY ESF.

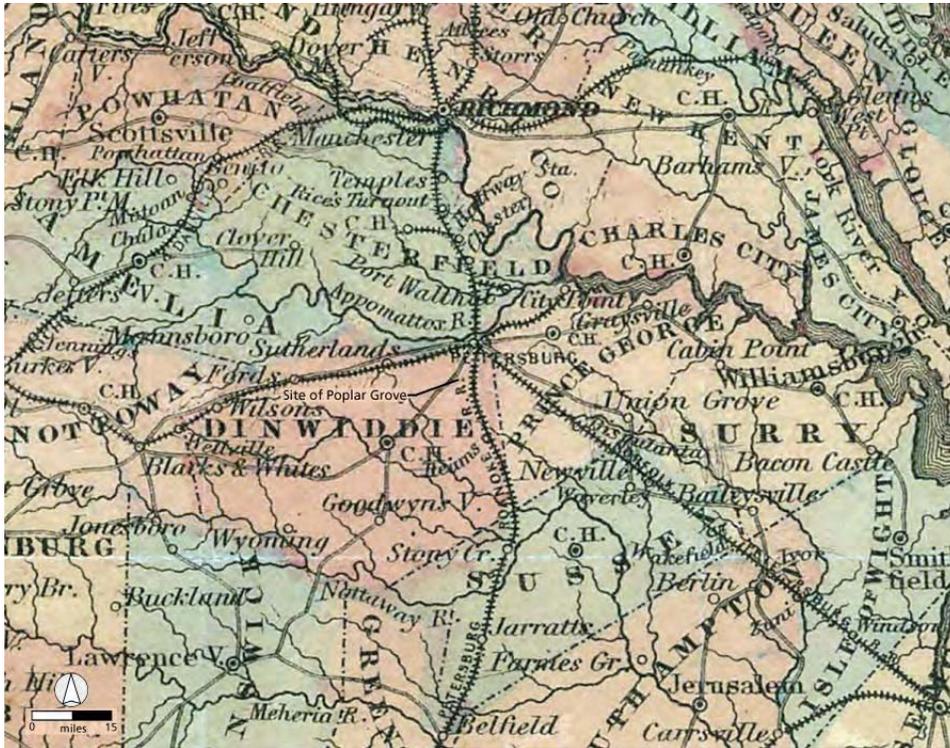


Figure 1.3: Detail, *Colton's Virginia* (New York: J. H. Colton, c.1855), showing Dinwiddie County and Petersburg as a transportation nexus. Library of Virginia, linked through the Library of Congress, American Memory Collection website, glva01 lva0086, annotated by SUNY ESF.



Figure 1.4: Map of area south of Petersburg near future site of Poplar Grove National Cemetery prior to the Civil War. Detail, "Correct Map of Dinwiddie County by Ishmae. Hargraves," c.1850, annotated by SUNY ESF. National Archives II, College Park, Maryland.

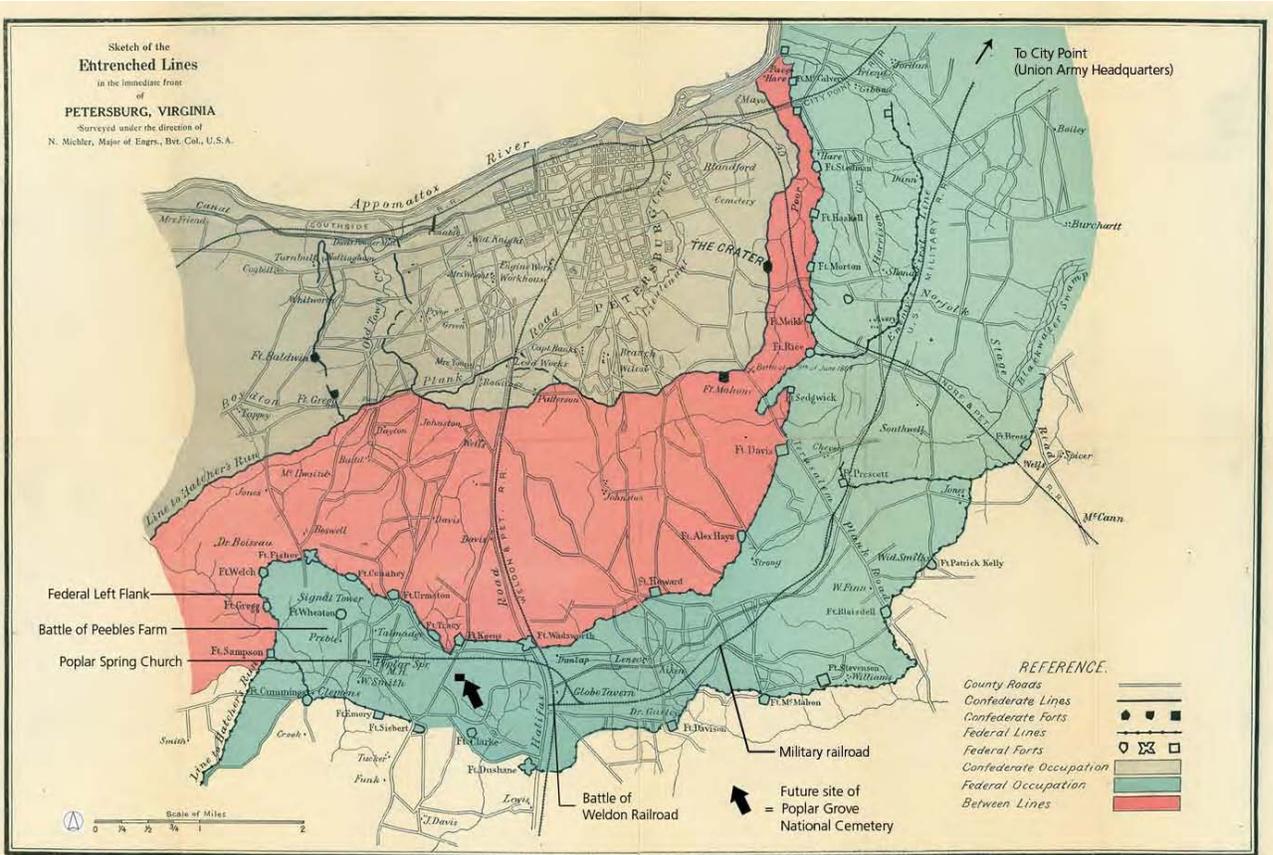


Figure 1.5: Map of the entrenched lines in the Petersburg Campaign redrawn from survey by Brevet Colonel N. Michler, 1864-65 (Petersburg: T. S. Beckwith & Co., c.1890). The map does not show the location of military camps or all farms. Library of Virginia, linked through the Library of Congress, American Memory Collection website, glva01 lva00165, annotated by SUNY ESF.



Figure 1.6: Engraving of the Poplar Spring Church (Meeting House) in the aftermath of the Battle of Peebles Farm on September 30th, 1864. Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, 22 October 1864, front cover.



Figure 1.7: Engraving illustrating Union troops cutting the military railroad through the dense forests south of Petersburg, probably in the Left Flank. Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, 1 October 1864.



Figure 1.8: "Earthworks in front of Petersburg, Virginia," 1865, illustrating typical timber and earthen fortification and ravaged pine forest in background. The exact location of this photograph is not known. Library of Congress, American Memory website, LC-DIG-cwpb-01326.



Figure 1.9: Camp of Oneida, New York Independent Cavalry Company in Petersburg (exact location unknown), showing quarters constructed of logs, with stumps from slashed pine forest in foreground, March 1865. Library of Congress American Memory website, LC-DIG-cwpb 03713.

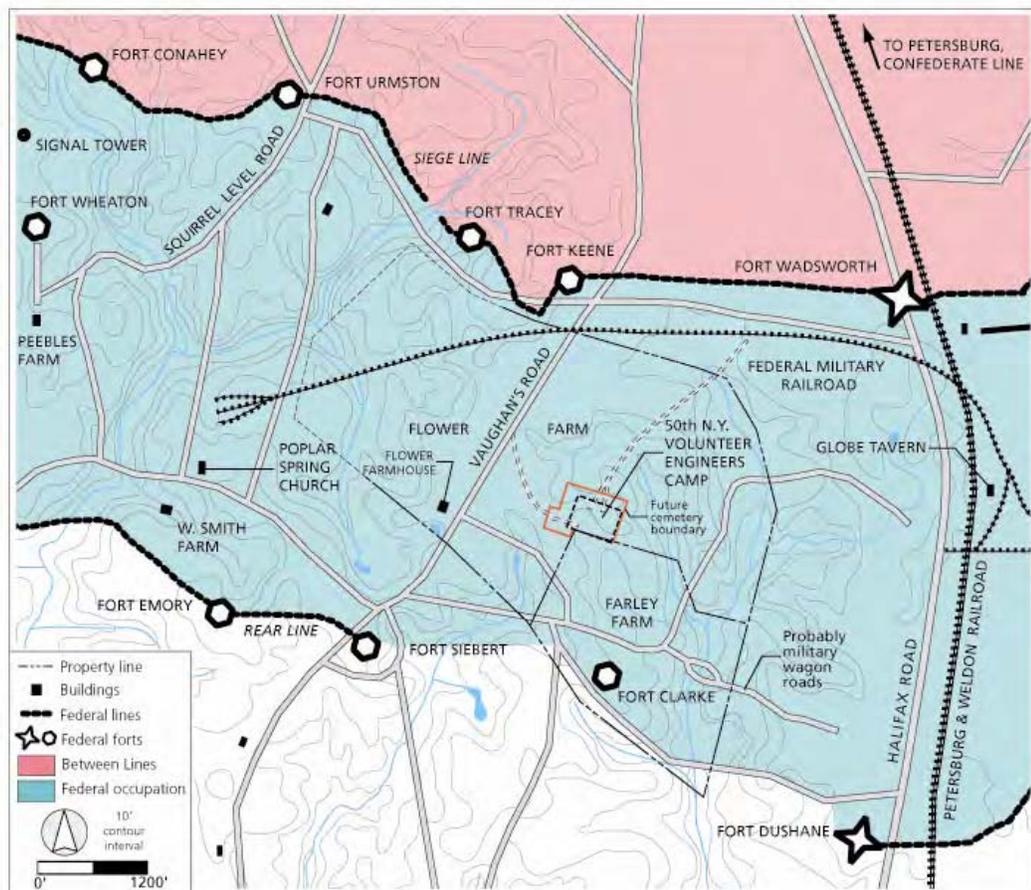


Figure 1.10: Diagram of the Federal Left Flank in the vicinity of the camp of the 50th New York Volunteer Engineers (future site of Poplar Grove National Cemetery), based on Michler 1864-1865 survey (Figure 1.4). SUNY ESF.



Figure 1.11: Stereographic photograph looking northwest into the officer quarters courtyard of the engineers' camp showing initial tent structures, circa October 1864. The headquarters tent is the one in the middle with the paired arched entrance. Library of Congress, American Memory website, LC-DIG-cwpb-00513.



Figure 1.12: Photograph by Timothy O'Sullivan of the headquarters tent of the 50th New York Volunteer Engineers, view looking southwest, November 1864. Library of Congress American Memory website, LC-DIG-cwp-4a39989.

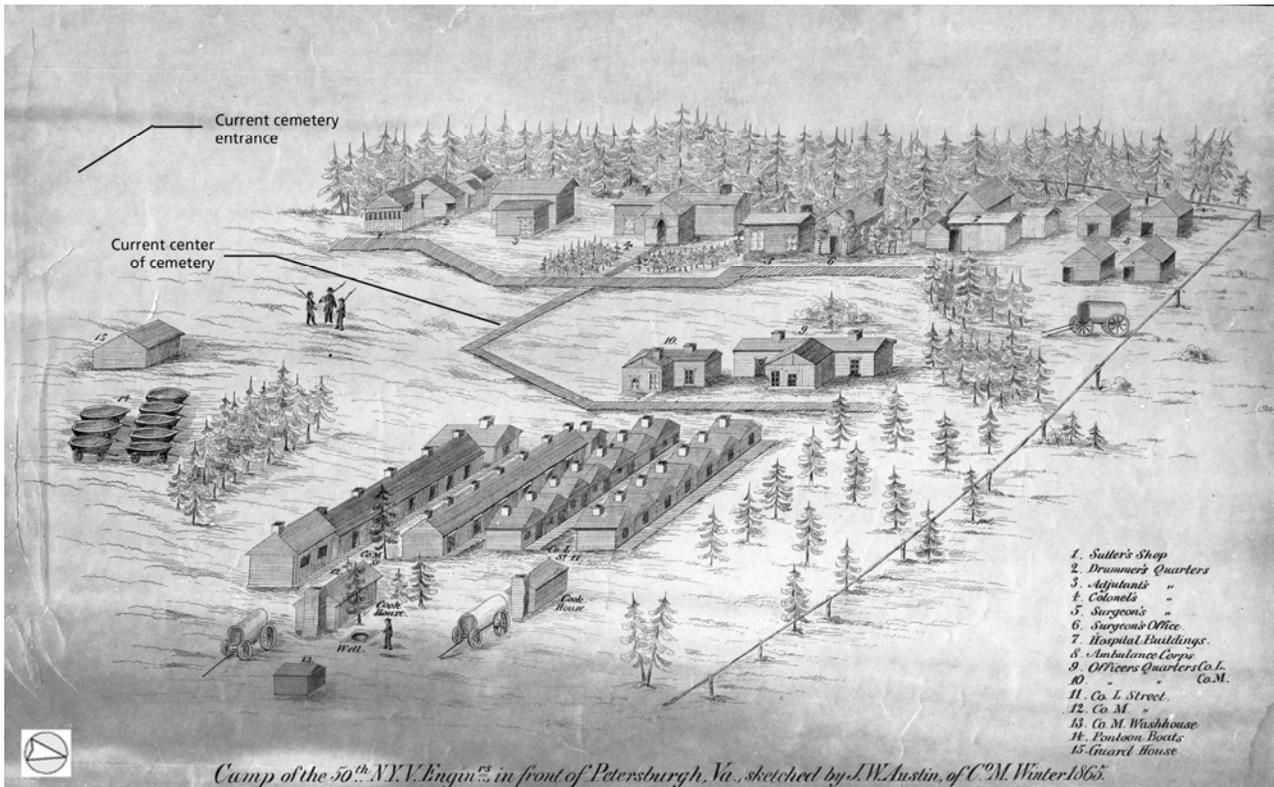


Figure 1.13: Perspective drawing of the engineers' camp looking southwest toward Vaughan Road, probably showing conditions in January 1865. The camp at the time was under improvement and additional buildings would be added through the next few months. Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, Virginia, image 1999.161.535.



Figure 1.14: Photograph of the rebuilt officer quarters courtyard, view looking northwest from parade grounds (same view as Figure 1.10) with Colonel's Quarters building in the center, dated 1864 (probably December). Library of Congress American Memory website, LC-DIG-cwp-02846.



Figure 1.15: Detail of the Surgeon's Quarters in the officer quarters courtyard showing rustic details, fencing, and corduroy walks, view looking northeast toward Poplar Grove Church, March 1865. Library of Congress American Memory website, LC-DIG-cwpb 03905.



Figure 1.16: View looking west of the officer quarters courtyard showing axis with the Colonel's Quarters, fencing, and lattice arches, March 1865. Barely visible in the ground is the central corduroy walk, which passed through the current site of the cemetery flagstaff. Library of Congress American Memory website, LC-DIG-cwpb 03906.



Figure 1.17: Photograph of Poplar Grove Church near completion, looking northeast from the officers' quarters, circa February 1864 (entry dated November 1864). Note lack of glazing in the windows, additional buildings to the right, and loblolly pine woods in background. Library of Congress American Memory website, LC-DIG-cwpb 00990.

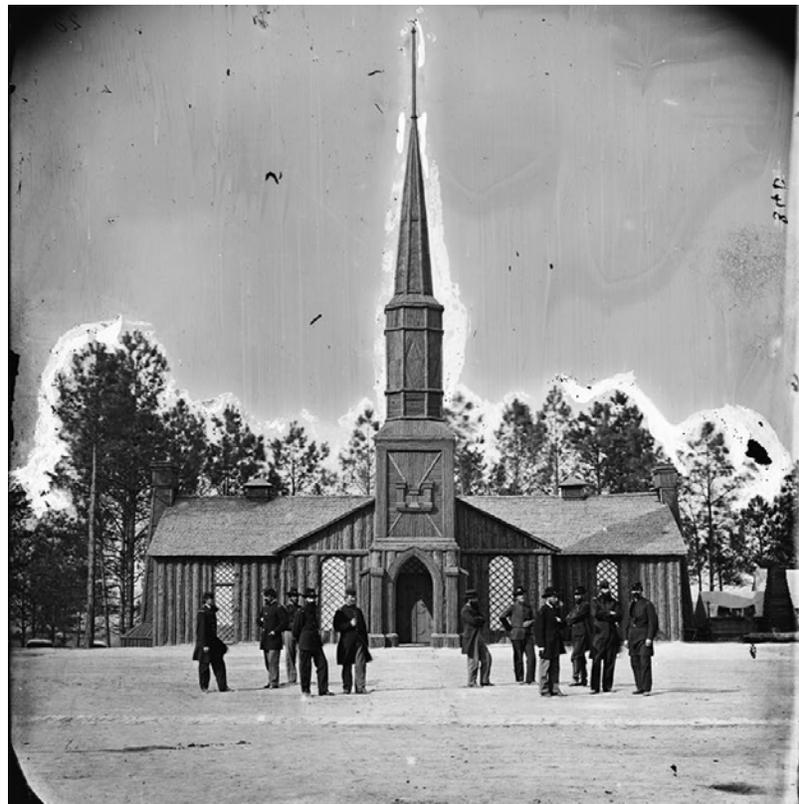


Figure 1.18: Photograph of Poplar Grove Church looking north, March 1865. Library of Congress American Memory website, LC-DIG-cwpb 03886.