

# Fort Stevens Review

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*Helping to Preserve the History of Oregon's Fort Stevens State Park*  
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CHECK OUT THE CIVIL WAR REENACTMENT SEPTEMBER 2, 3, 4!!

## What's In A Name?

By D. Lindstrom

Day after day visitors walk by Battery Pratt, situated in the middle of the gun line at Fort Stevens State Park. Battery Pratt emplaced two 6-inch rifles on disappearing carriages and was active between 1900 and 1943. The battery's most notable event occurred over Sunday-Monday, June 21-22, 1942. On Sunday officers, cannoneers, plotters, and spotters were getting ready for an important practice early Monday morning. Once settled in at their stations for the night, their sleep was unexpectedly interrupted by ground shaking explosions. Unbelievably, it was rapidly apparent that the shells were in-coming from an enemy submarine. Not much sleep was had after that, and the scheduled practice was carried out Monday morning as planned. The adrenalin was running high. The Battery Pratt boys proved their worth and nailed the targets.

This battery; what's in a name? Who was Pratt? The Coast Artillery Corps had a habit of naming gun batteries in honor of revered or fallen comrades. So it was that "Battery Pratt was named by General Order No. 20, dated 25 January 1906, in honor of Brevet Captain (1<sup>st</sup> Lt.) James Pepper Pratt, 11<sup>th</sup> United States Infantry, who fought in the Civil War and was killed at Bethesda Church, Virginia, on 29 May 1864 while serving as Adjutant of his Battalion..."

Do we have a story here or don't we? Let's find out. His name is intriguing and since Battery Pratt is currently the focus of modest restoration, it only seems natural that we should know more about this James Pepper Pratt. His story

is appealing and sad at the same time. He represents the tragedy of every war, the slaying of the nation's youth, her promising ones at that.

James Pratt was born on October 9, 1841 in Logansport, Indiana to Daniel and Sophia Pratt. He was the oldest of three children; a brother Charles and a sister, Julia. Daniel Pratt was a successful lawyer and a good provider for his family. His mother passed away in 1861. You could say that James was a privileged child. All his needs were met and then some. In spite of his advantages, which can have a corrupting influence, his parents instilled in him respect and compassion for others and a love of literature and writing. He wasn't really a "book worm," as he enjoyed friends and was known to be "frank and communicative." James was modest with a great sense of humor while being concerned about fairness for the "wronged." No doubt he developed the latter attributes by watching and listening to his father.

James attended "city schools" in Logansport. Upon finishing in 1858, he entered Wabash College found in Crawfordsville, Indiana. It was a small liberal arts college for men and still is today. (Wabash is one of three male-only collages still remaining in the nation.) Perhaps with the thought of entering a law practice, James transferred to Yale College in 1859. He completed his course in 1861 and went back to Logansport with thoughts of studying and practicing law in his father's office.

At Yale's "Triennial Meeting of the class of 1861," which took place after James' death in 1864, a solemn tribute and poem were presented in his honor.

"Those of us who knew him most intimately, bear uniform testimony not only that he was a man of much more than ordinary ability, for he was a good talker and a graceful yet earnest writer, but also that he was a frank, genial, manly companion. We remember, as if it were yesterday, his ringing, hearty laugh, and the quick, ready humor, that was never at fault for a repartee."

A classmate noted that James left Yale in sadness, perhaps due to his mother's illness. Once home though, he didn't linger. On April 12, 1861 the "telegraph flashed" that Fort Sumter was attacked by southern forces. "The streets of Indiana were black with breathless multitudes still awaiting tidings of the seventy loyal men in an unfinished fort, bombarded by ten thousand raging rebels!" (The Soldier of Indiana... C. Merrill, 1864).

James didn't have to serve. He could have avoided the whole thing, but that was not to be. In spite of his mother's illness and his father's needs, his "ready, generous sympathy for the suffering and wronged," held sway. In October 1861 he headed up to Indianapolis and on the 28<sup>th</sup>, of that month, "enlisted as a private for three years in the 19<sup>th</sup> regiment of the United States Regulars."

For four months he was with the ranks and was noted for his cheerfulness. As one expressed, military life was perhaps hard for him due to his "previous habits of indulgence and luxury." But that was not the case, and he came to the attention of President Lincoln. Lincoln sent a nomination to the US Senate requesting that James be commissioned as a lieutenant in the regular army, and so it was. Once commissioned, James spent over a year in New York and Massachusetts recruiting for military service. In so doing it is said that he made a lot of friends. While recruiting was as safe a task as anyone could ask for, James was not happy with it. In the spring of 1863 he "joyfully hailed the summons to join his Regiment in the field."

In a letter to his father dated April 17, 1863, James wrote, "I had a glorious ride yesterday afternoon...a friend of mine...and myself took two splendid animals belonging to the ambulance corps...We rushed by regiments, divisions, and corps at a magnificent gallop...In an hour or so we were in sight of the Rappahannock, and after scrambling, reached the top of a hill overlooking the whole scene...Taken all in all, I never saw a finer sight—the town itself—the broad slope, with its green woods and fields, and crowning all, the rebel camps, and the frowning line of works." His father received a number of these letters and James sent stories about his experiences to the hometown newspaper.

Almost immediately James fell into a leadership role. Once, when his Captain was absent, most likely at the battle at Chancellorsville, James was in command of his 5<sup>th</sup> Army

Corps Company. In late June of 1863, as things were ramping up for the battle at Gettysburg, the march of the 5<sup>th</sup> Corps from the Rappahannock River to Frederick was difficult (Honor-Duty-Courage, by Karlton Smith). Lt. James Pratt of the 11<sup>th</sup> US Infantry, wrote to his father that his feet "are one complete blister. It was with the greatest difficulty I kept along, but I was determined to do it. I don't think I could march another hour though." A few days later James wrote that both his shoes and socks were worn out, that his blistering feet were unprotected. He reported "we shall probably come upon the Rebels by to-morrow evening or the next day." (Smith attributes this quote to the book, The Soldier of Indiana... but the cited page doesn't match up.)

On June 29, the 5<sup>th</sup> Corps continued north with a march of fifteen miles from Frederick to Liberty and eventually arrived at Hanover, Pennsylvania on July 1. The famous Little Round Top Civil War encounter soon came into play. James participated in the advance of Regulars from the north slope of Little Round Top to a stone fence on the edge of a wheat field. Lt. Pratt wrote that the advance was, "over rocks and in the marsh. A dozen paces forward, and we came within this enfilading fire. Men began to fall very fast, but the line kept steadily on. We gained the other side, and lay down." (Smith attributes this quote to the book, The Soldier of Indiana... but the cited page doesn't match up.)

At Gettysburg James was "twice struck," but the seriousness of his condition isn't known. He participated in the Bristoe-Rappahannock Station campaign over October and November of 1863. At last in December he received a short leave of absence and headed home to his father's house in Logansport. Afterwards, over the winter his regiment guarded the Orange and Alexandria Rail Road which connected the Army with its base of supplies. Due to the regiment's fine reputation, they were not relieved until Grant began his advance on Richmond. On New Year's day, January 1864 James was promoted to Adjutant of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of his regiment. Now things began to move quickly. He experienced the Wilderness battle, several other contests, and crossed Virginia's Pamunkey River. His comrades noted James' bravery and he gained "credit for his gallant conduct."

In a letter to his father spanning May 4-10, 1864 James wrote, "I have just sent around Gen. Meade's battle address to his troops; a splendid composition. We expect every hour to go into action. It will be desperate. God grant it may be successful." May 10, "It looks dark. We have been fighting seven days now. God grant we may win. If I am killed do get my body and bury it decently, Good-by, JAMES"

"May 13<sup>th</sup>, 1864: My dear Father—Still alive, but the excessive fatigue and fighting have been terrific. We have been under fire ever since the 5<sup>th</sup>. The regiment lost 83 yesterday: only 139 left. I think we shall fight again today. Good-bye Your son, JAMES"

“Evening, May 16<sup>th</sup>, 1864: My Dear Father:—Still in existence. We had a heavy engagement on the 12<sup>th</sup>; lost 83 men and an officer. Out of 300 men we only have 126 left. We are badly used up, but hope to stand it through. Love to all, Julia and Charlie. Your affectionate son, JAMES”

“Near Spottsylvania, VA May 19, 1864: My Dear Father:—Still unhurt and in good spirits. We were under an awful artillery fire yesterday, but behind good works and well protected. The dirt showered over us though...The picket lines this morning are only a few yards apart. We can distinctly see their movements. My health is much better\* ...Out of 345 men we left Alexandria with, we have 160 left, and six officers less than we started with...Well, good-bye, God grant the right may win...Your affectionate son, JAMES” \*(Perhaps a ref. to his Gettysburg wounds.)

“May 24<sup>th</sup>, 1864: My Dear Father:—We crossed the North Anna yesterday...It was waist deep and very swift with a rough bottom, the crossing was very slow...Our division was the first of the army across, and as soon as they reached the top of the...bank of the river commenced fire. All out of breath, half the command barefoot, we formed and advanced a mile in splendid line...I must tell you of a little personal incident happening yesterday...(an) infantry man reported...that he had seen a battery wheel into position...about three quarters of a mile in front of us...I immediately reported the fact to...headquarters...”

James volunteered to investigate, and after hesitation he was given permission. He rode his horse around the suspected site by several miles and went within twenty yards of the supposed battery, seeing none, he “got a whole volley from their cavalry, and was nearly captured.” James asked his father not to publish this letter.

A series of engagements took place over May 28-30, 1864, some twelve miles north of Richmond, Virginia, the Confederacy’s capital. Grant’s Army was attempting to maneuver around Lee’s right flank and had just avoided a trap. On the 28<sup>th</sup>, Union and Confederate infantry arrived in the vicinity of Totopotomy Creek. On Sunday afternoon the 29<sup>th</sup>, Union forces probed General Lee’s position along the creek and apparently a small number, including James, crossed the creek and approached Bethesda Church. At 5:00 PM a shot rang out piercing James Pratt through the heart. His death was instantaneous.

His body was hurriedly carried four miles back to the field hospital to be embalmed. That proving impractical, he was given a soldier’s burial. A fellow soldier wrote a letter to one of James’ Yale classmates saying in part,

“He died a soldier’s death and was buried in his blanket, with a simple board to mark his resting place...Pratt and I were companions when children in school, and since we have been companions on the long and tedious march, and in the battle-field. I always found him a gentleman on duty, and a soldier in the hour of danger and trial. He has fought

his fight, and occupies an honored grave, the grave of a soldier.”

So, there you have it, a promising 23-year old man cut down before his time. Had he lived, what would he have accomplished? This...this...is a question asked over and over again and asked age after age. James’ story is an old one, a story that never ends, if only it would. Now, as I pass by Battery Pratt, the place will have a new meaning for me, a haunting one at that.

Post Script. After the surrender at Appomattox, James’ remains were retrieved by his regiment. His coffin was wrapped in the regiment’s old battle flag. They placed it on a caisson drawn by six horses preceded by an escort and band. “With muffled drum the march into Richmond was made with all that was left of poor Pratt.” From there his remains were put aboard a train for Logansport, Indiana. The escort was under the command of Brevet Capt. Irving B. Wright, assisted by a lieutenant, four sergeants, four corporals, and forty-two privates. James Pratt was re-interred on November 12, 1865 in a proper grave next to his beloved mother.



1 Lt. James Pepper Pratt 1841 – 1864

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## 1917: 100 Years Ago Congress Declared War On Germany

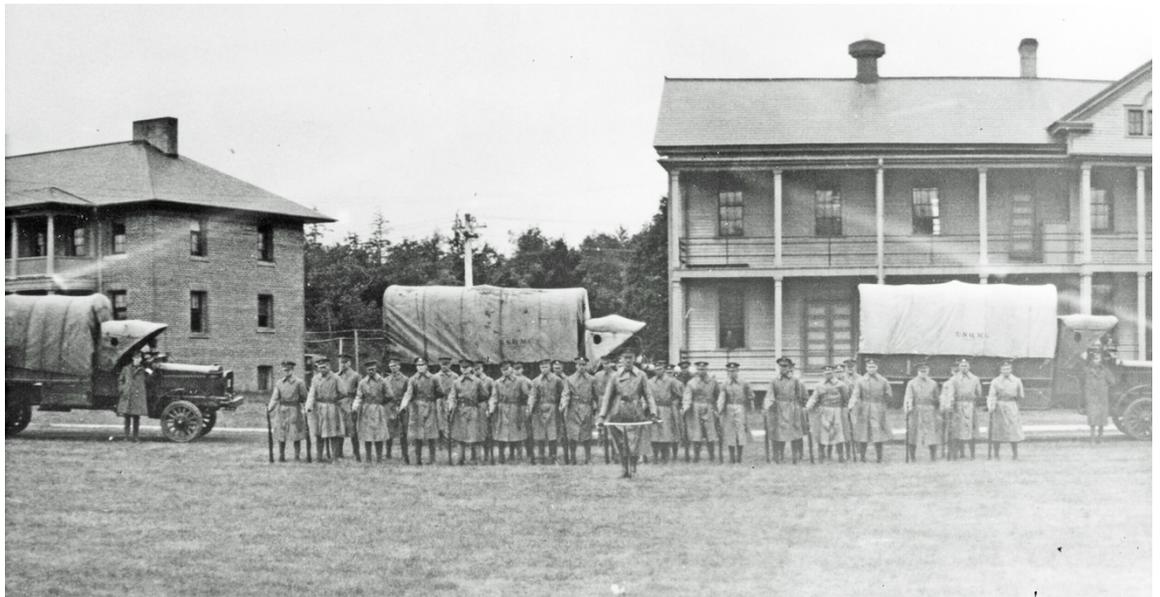
Photos on this page are from the photo archives of Fort Stevens State Park, Oregon Parks and Recreation Dept.



The photo was taken at Fort Stevens on Wednesday, July 15, 1917. By the end of 1917 the combined strength of the Coast Defenses of the Columbia was over 1,550 men. These consisted of four companies of National Guard and four companies of regular Army. By the end of 1918 all companies were part of the United States Army. As of October 1917 there were no buildings to house the men and officers, so they lived in tents. Conditions were harsh. By spring "wood frame cantonment barracks" were constructed. Contagious disease were a huge problem and new draftees were quarantined for two weeks. Then there was the influenza epidemic of 1918. Twenty-three died in October and fourteen in November. Moving on, the Chief of Coast Artillery pointed out that the German fleet was held close to its base(s). He speculated that coastal attacks would come from submarines and raiding ships, all

of which had small caliber guns. So, he recommended that some large caliber guns arming coastal forts be made available for railway or heavy truck mounts in France. Fort Stevens surrendered four such guns from the West Battery for a service that proved unnecessary. In the meantime, coastal forts were to maintain training, maintenance, and improve their facilities. Training was done with the Western Front in mind. As needed, the intent was to have men ready to increase and or replace fallen Coast Artillery personnel in France.

This World War I era photo was taken at Fort Stevens. In the foreground is the Coast Defense Quartermaster Corps. As Regular Army, they were under the leadership of Captain George Burton who relived Captain L. G. Krook. Both men were army reserve officers. Captain Krook was not well and confined to quarters where he took his own life. Heavy pressure was placed on these men as the Coast Defenses of the Columbia were not prepared for the sudden influx of several thousand men. Captain Burton had his own difficulties coping with the "wartime pressures of cantonment construction and other service demands."



A second Quartermaster reserve officer was sent to help him. As noted above, by October 1917 over 1,550 troops arrived. As of June 1918 that number swelled to over 2,500 men and officers; some of which crewed the gun batteries across the Columbia River.



These two WWI photos are from the Ferguson collection. They reveal a cantonment inside the earthworks. To the left can be seen a ramp and stairs leading to the Battery Freeman's gun deck. On the right is an interior view of Freeman.

