

Episode 207: The Dutch Gap Canal

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Benjamin Butler was one of a number of politicians who were granted military rank at the beginning of the Civil War. Although he had little military experience prior to the war, Butler was appointed a Major General in the Union army. As a key political ally of President Abraham Lincoln, his superior officers were in a quandary as to what they should do with Butler. Early in the war, he supervised the occupation of New Orleans and was so vilified there that Southerners gave him the nickname “Beast Butler”.

In May of 1864, as the Overland Campaign concluded with both the Union and Confederate armies moving to the outskirts of Richmond, overall Union commander Ulysses S. Grant assigned Butler and his troops the job of destroying the rail lines from Petersburg to Richmond. As Butler’s men moved up the Virginia Peninsula, they found themselves on a curious area called Bermuda Hundred.

Bermuda Hundred was the first incorporated town in Virginia, having been founded in 1613. The “hundred” part of the name was an English term designating a large plot of land suitable for one hundred homesteads. This particular plot of land was in a narrow region between the Appomattox and James rivers.

As Butler and his men attempted to press on toward Petersburg in May of 1864, they were confronted by Confederate troops under P.G.T. Beauregard at the point where Bermuda Hundred opens back up from its narrow confines between the two rivers. After a series of battles, both sides sat back to consider the situation. As Grant later wrote in his memoirs of a conversation with his chief engineer:

“He said that the general occupied a place between the James and Appomattox rivers which was of great strength, and where with an inferior force he could hold it for an indefinite length of time against a superior; but that he could do nothing offensively. I then asked him why Butler could not move out from his lines and push across the Richmond and Petersburg Railroad to the rear and on the south side of Richmond. He replied that it was impracticable, because the enemy had substantially the same line across the neck of land that General Butler had. He then took out his pencil and drew a sketch of the locality, remarking that the position was like a bottle and that Butler's line of entrenchments across the neck represented the cork; that the enemy had built an equally strong line immediately in front of him across the neck; and it was therefore as if Butler was in a bottle. He was perfectly safe against an attack; but, as Barnard expressed it, the enemy had corked the bottle and with a small force could hold the cork in its place.

In late summer of 1864, Butler devised an ingenious attempt to get out of his situation. At a point called Dutch Gap where the James River made a tortuous hairpin turn, there was a small ditch connecting the two parts of the river. Using mainly African-American labor, Butler started a project to build a canal across the bend, thereby giving him an escape route. Although the canal project was derided by critics as yet another aspect of Butler's comical command and was never completed before Grant transferred him to another disastrous appointment in North Carolina, it was finally finished after the war. Butler, then a member of Congress, was able to see its completion and the Dutch Gap canal is now the main channel of the James River in that area.