

The Evacuation of Yorktown and the Battle of Williamsburg

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About a week after the battle between the CSS *Virginia* and the USS *Monitor*, a gigantic flotilla of more conventional ships left the wharves of Alexandria, Virginia. Carrying over 120,000 men and countless tons of equipment and supplies, the expedition under the command of Major General George B. McClellan was headed for Fortress Monroe on the tip of Virginia's Peninsula. From that staging point, McClellan planned to begin an offensive that would take Richmond and end the Civil War.

McClellan arrived at Fortress Monroe on April 2, 1862 in a foul mood. Several weeks earlier Lincoln had removed him from overall command of the Union armies and had left him commanding only the Army of the Potomac. Ostensibly, this was so that McClellan could focus on the upcoming Peninsula Campaign, but was more likely a response by Lincoln to McClellan's inaction during the previous months.

McClellan had hoped that his land attack up the peninsula would be supported by the Federal Navy, but Flag Officer Louis Goldsborough indicated that the continued presence of the CSS *Virginia* made this impossible. As McClellan looked up the peninsula, the first obstacle in his path to Richmond was the Confederate force at Yorktown. Though they numbered only 15,000 or so, the southern troops were firmly entrenched. Fearing that they might be reinforced by the Confederate soldiers who had recently retreated southward from Manassas, McClellan decided to attack immediately. The Union army moved out on April 4 and encountered the first resistance on the outskirts of Yorktown on the afternoon of April 5.

Here occurred one of the more humorous deceptions of the war. Confederate Major General John B. Magruder had one company of his men move in a circle across an opening in the woods, convincing the Union officers that the Confederate numbers were actually very high. As a result, McClellan chose not to attack but rather to put Yorktown under siege from artillery. He began a buildup of siege artillery with the intent of opening a barrage on May 5. An observation balloon on May 4 indicated to the stunned McClellan what some escaped slaves had told him on the previous day: the Confederate lines at Yorktown were now empty. Fearing the impending assault, the southern forces had withdrawn during the night up the peninsula to Williamsburg.

Furious, McClellan marched his men northward and on the next day, May 5, 1862, he engaged the enemy at Williamsburg. Sharp fighting followed during the day, around Williamsburg and through the campus of the College of William and Mary. By nightfall, the battle had ended in stalemate, with about 2,200 casualties on the northern side and close to 1,700 on the southern. Confederate General Joseph Johnston, now in overall command of the forces on the peninsula, ordered his men to continue their withdrawal to the stronger fortifications of Richmond, fifty miles away. Johnston would place most of his men to the north and east sides of the city where they could use the Chickahominy River as a natural defensive barrier.

McClellan would proceed ponderously in pursuit after receiving erroneous reports that he was outnumbered by the Confederates. He would eventually move his men also toward the Confederate strong points north and east of the city. Despite the Confederate strength there, he wanted to be able to connect with the forces of Brigadier General Irvin McDowell who were moving south from Fredericksburg to reinforce him. By late in May, McClellan would have

about two-thirds of his men north of the Chickahominy and about one-third to the south of the river. This displacement would prove nearly disastrous in the upcoming Battle of Seven Pines.