



2 BATTLES. 1 MEDAL OF HONOR. OUR NEXT PRESERVATION VICTORY.



"They might as well have tried to check a tornado"

— Union Col. James M. Schoonmaker, Third Winchester

"Schoonmaker's Charge" by Thure de Thulstrup, Courtesy Soldiers & Sailors Memorial Hall & Museum

Star Fort - Guardian of Civil War Winchester

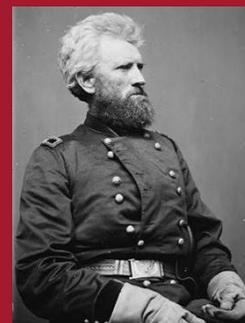
The image above shows Col. James Schoonmaker and Federal cavalry charging across the target property (the "ramparts" of Star Fort) during the Third Battle of Winchester – the action that earned Schoonmaker the Medal of Honor.

THE FORTS OF WINCHESTER

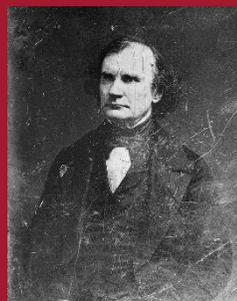
During the Civil War, Winchester had the misfortune to be highly prized and difficult to defend. Located on the Valley Turnpike at the northern end of the Valley, where the tides of war changed quickly and military movement was swift, the city changed hands over 70 times. Because of its importance and vulnerability, both sides attempted to strengthen its defenses, most notably in the trio of forts that were constructed northwest of the city – Fort Milroy, West Fort, and Star Fort.

MILROY AND SELMA

The first works on the Star Fort site were erected in 1861, when Confederate troops in the 4th Alabama constructed a series of gun emplacements called "Fort Alabama." When Union forces under Gen. Robert Milroy occupied the city in early 1863, they constructed a new, much larger, and more imposing fortification on the site: "Star Fort." The new fort was part of a larger system of fortifications that stretched along the ridge northwest of Winchester. Star Fort's elevated position afforded long views as far away as Harper's Ferry that were strategically important for protecting the town, the Valley Pike, and the nearby railroad lines.



Union Gen. Robert Milroy



James Mason was one of the Confederate diplomats seized in the Trent Affair, which almost led to war between the U.S. and England. He was also one of the first to interview John Brown after his capture at Harper's Ferry.

When constructing the forts, Milroy, a fervent abolitionist, instructed his men to use stone from the nearby home of former U.S. Senator James Mason, author of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act. During his occupation of the city, Milroy's strict treatment of the citizens led to mutual bitterness.

"Today the walls of Mr. Mason's house were pulled down... They have taken the stones...to build their fortifications."

Winchester diarist Cornelia Peake McDonald, January 20, 1863

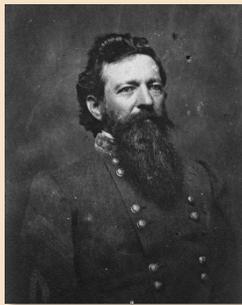


The above close-up from Jedediah Hotchkiss's map of the Second Battle of Winchester shows Star Fort at upper right, West Fort at left, and Fort Milroy (aka the Main Fort) at lower right.

THE SECOND BATTLE OF WINCHESTER

Milroy's stay in the city ended with the Second Battle of Winchester (June 13-15, 1863), the Confederate victory that opened the way for Robert E. Lee's second invasion of the north. As Lee prepared to move in June 1863, he ordered his II Corps, under Gen. Richard S. Ewell, to clear the northern Shenandoah Valley of Federal opposition. Ewell's columns converged on Milroy and his garrison in Winchester. Instead of retreating in the face of superior numbers, Milroy determined to make a stand, confident in the strength of his fortifications.

After initial fighting south of Winchester on June 13, Milroy pulled his forces back and concentrated them in the triangle formed by the three forts: Fort Milroy, West Fort, and Star Fort.



Gen. Harry T. Hays

At dawn on June 14, Ewell sent Confederate Gen. Jubal A. Early's division on a flanking march to the west, out of sight of the Union forces. At 6pm, Early unleashed a devastating artillery barrage that stunned the thoroughly-surprised Federal defenders, who felt "as if hell itself had burst its bolts and bars and was bringing fire and tempests on the world." Under cover of the artillery fire,

Confederate Gen. Harry T. Hays's Louisiana Tigers advanced to the base of West Fort, then swept into the works. After a brief hand-to-hand struggle, the Union defenders abandoned the fortifications, retreating to the other forts.

The Federals in Star Fort and in the rifle pits around it steadied themselves for an attack, but with the gathering darkness no significant assault came. Even so, the two sides engaged in a furious artillery duel. "The guns in Star Fort greeted them with shell after shell planted among them with astonishing precision," recalled Lt. William Beach of the 1st NY cavalry. Confederate return fire crashed into the fort, taking a toll on men (one of the Union artillerymen had his leg torn off) and artillery horses. Union Pvt. Frederick W. Wild recalled a horse that "had a piece torn out of his throat as wide as your hand...Every time he exhaled, a spurt of blood came out with the air. He appeared to know that he was going to die...He was trembling as if cold."

"We had to work our guns on our knees, the shell killing our horses and wounding our men... but we gave them as good as we sent."
— Union artilleryman in Star Fort, Second Winchester

After dark, Milroy abandoned his remaining entrenchments in an attempt to "cut [his] way through" to Harper's Ferry. Ewell had anticipated that move, however, and Confederate Gen. Edward "Allegheny" Johnson's division marched at night and before daylight on June 15 cut off Milroy's retreat just north of Winchester. Milroy's force was destroyed, with most of his men captured. The stunning Confederate victory cleared the Valley of Federal troops and opened the door for the Confederates to continue north – ultimately to Gettysburg.

THE THIRD BATTLE OF WINCHESTER

Star Fort again played a key role at the Third Battle of Winchester on September 19, 1864, but this time the Confederates were defending the fortifications and the Federals were the attackers.

Learning that Confederate Gen. Jubal A. Early's force was reduced and divided, Union Gen. Philip H. Sheridan attempted to cut off and destroy Early's army at Winchester. The ensuing battle became the largest and costliest clash ever fought in the Valley, with fighting that ranged over 30 square miles.

Throughout the day, the larger Federal force pressured the Confederates from the east and north. To the east, fighting raged at now-familiar landmarks such as the Middle Field and the West Woods. To the north, Union cavalry pushed relentlessly at the outmanned Confederate defenders, gradually driving them back towards Winchester. By afternoon, the Confederates had withdrawn into a right-angled defensive line north and east of the city, with their far left flank anchored at the fortifications northwest of the city – Star Fort, Fort Collier, and Fort Jackson.

As Sheridan launched his final attacks late in the day, the pressure mounted on the Confederate defenders in the forts. "Things looked very ugly for us," Confederate Col. Thomas Munford recalled. The fighting in and around the forts was tumultuous and confusing, and post-war recollections unsurprisingly gave conflicting accounts of the furious action.

Among the attackers was the cavalry brigade commanded by Col. James Schoonmaker, which included the 14th Pennsylvania, 8th Ohio, and 22nd Pennsylvania regiments. Schoonmaker recalled, "Four ten pound Parrott guns in the old Star Fort built by Milroy were playing sad havoc in our lines...right up the hillside in the face of the guns and rifle pits filled with infantry rode our noble regiment...we carried the two lines of rifle pits and were under the guns of the fort...we clambered over the parapets of the fort on horseback, capturing the guns." Schoonmaker later received the Medal of Honor for his role.

The assaults broke the Confederate line, sending the defenders "whirling through Winchester." As the day ended, the city – and Star Fort – had changed hands for the final time during the war.

"Had we not taken the Star Fort, it is equally certain we would not have won the fight that day." — Union Col. James Schoonmaker



Union Capt. Ashbel Duncan, 14th Pennsylvania Cavalry, was mortally wounded in the attack. Schoonmaker wrote that he had told him, "Duncan, we must take those guns or get out of range. They are knocking holes in us as big as barn doors." (Image courtesy Gen. Duncan Campbell.)



Detail from image on front, showing Duncan and Schoonmaker.