

Beholding the Fort

Visitors to Fort Delaware State Park travel back to 1864 and the Civil War.

THE UNION SOLDIERS HAVE JUST FIRED THEIR MUSKETS, and the sulfurous smell of gun smoke hangs in the air. I can hear the sharp banging of the blacksmith's tools from inside his shop as I ascend the spiral staircase two flights to the top of the fort for a glimpse of the mustard-colored POW barracks on the other side of a moat filled with muddy water.

When the ferry *Delafort* had left Delaware City, Delaware, the year was 2017. But after journeying just a half-mile across the Delaware River, we passengers had arrived 153 years in the past, in the summer of 1864, a time when Pea Patch Island was home to about 8,000 Confederate prisoners of war, in addition to some 300 Union infantry who guarded them and another 800 artillery who lived inside the small, pentagon-shaped granite-and-brick-fortress known as Fort Delaware. Hundreds of civilians also lived on Pea Patch Island, all working to support the fort and its day-to-day functioning. There's even record of a hotel and cookhouse here during the war, staffed by a Mrs. Patterson.

This iteration of Fort Delaware (a short-lived earlier fort burned down in 1831) opened in 1859 as an artillery post, and it saw use as recently as World War II, when a gun battery was manned for a few weeks after Pearl Harbor. Even then, the fort was obsolete, and it was abandoned in 1944. By the early 1960s, the island and its fort had opened regularly to visitors as Fort Delaware State Park.

Back in the 19th century, however, the fort was in a prime location just 40 miles downriver from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, able to protect that city as well as Wilmington, Delaware, from invasion. Fort Delaware's heyday had been during the four years of the Civil War, when it was among the largest of the Union's 14 prisoner-of-war camps. At its overcrowded height—right after the Battle of Gettysburg in the summer of 1863—it held as many as 12,500 POWs, 2 or more to a bunk in 52 spartan wooden barracks.

Today, it's hard to imagine that many people inhabiting this tiny island, but the costumed historical interpreters do their best to convey what life was like here during the Civil War. Interpreters dressed as military, for example, employ a "hats on/hats off" rule for how they speak. If their hats are on, they speak as if they were living in the midst of the Civil War, even expressing confusion at "all these women dressed like men"—that is, the female visitors wearing



PHOTO BY APRIL ABEL/DELAWARE STATE PARKS

pants instead of long dresses. Hats off, they are free to answer questions, such as my inquiry: "Are the plates, tools and uniforms on display real or replicas?" They are replicas, but no less interesting to the many children who come here with scout troops, summer camps and their families.

Tours of the fort are self-guided, with interpreters ready to answer questions stationed in various parts of the fort—staffing the ordnance room, baking in the officers' kitchen, washing clothing in a tub or guarding the prison barracks. Be sure to check *The Pea Patch Gazette*, available at the ferry office, for a schedule of the day's activities, which might include a guided living history tour as well as period-appropriate kids' games, a demonstration of the loading and firing of the 32-pound cannon, and marching on the parade grounds—audience participation encouraged.

Special POW weekends July 8–9 and August 12–13 will feature up to 50 costumed reenactors joining the usual staff of 20 interpreters, allowing for additional special programs and reenactments.

—Theresa Gawlas Medoff

WHAT: Fort Delaware State Park

WHERE: Ferry ticket office, 45 Clinton Street, Delaware City, Delaware

WHEN: Through September 4, Wednesdays through Fridays, 10 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.; Saturdays, Sundays and holidays, 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m.; after September 4, Saturdays and Sundays, 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. through September 30. Ticket office opens 30 minutes before the first ferry leaves and closes 30 minutes after the last ferry returns. Evening paranormal adventures are held in October; see the website or call the park office for information. The fort is then closed to tours until reopening the following year on the last weekend of April.

HOW MUCH: Adults \$12, military and those age 62 and up \$11, children age 2–12 \$7, free under age 2.

FOR MORE INFORMATION: 302/834-7941 or destateparks.com/park/fort-delaware/index.asp