

The Davis Bottom History Preservation Project

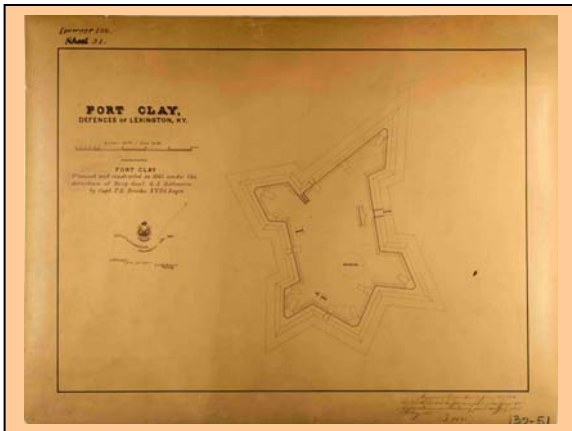
Fort Clay

Fort Clay was one of two forts built in 1863 by the Union Army in Lexington during the Civil War. The fortification was built on the southern ridge of the Davis Bottom valley along Versailles Pike, which was a strategic road leading into the western end of downtown Lexington. Fort Crittenden was built to protect eastern Lexington. Fort Clay was built in response to a raid by Confederate General John Hunt Morgan on Union troops camped at Ashland, the estate of Henry Clay. During project research, scholars compiled information about the fort, including maps, sketches, and descriptions of its construction, service, garrison and armaments.



Figure: FC1 Approximate location of Fort Clay on southern ridge of Davis Bottom.

Construction



The fort was planned and constructed by Captain T.B. Brooks, New York Volunteer Engineers, under the direction of Brigadier General Q.A. Gillmore. The official U.S. Engineers map shows it was a star-shaped structure with earthen and wood embankments and a surrounding ditch. Fort Clay was designed with 12 artillery batteries, two mortar emplacements, a magazine, a well and a gated drawbridge facing the Davis Bottom valley.

Figure: FC2 "Fort Clay, Defences of Lexington, KY." U.S. Engineers survey map printed June 1865, Cincinnati, Ohio. Courtesy, National Archives.

Based on archival accounts, the fort was built in 1863 by Union troops and local African American men who were impressed into service. Freeman and slaves were often forced to build Union defenses during the Civil War. In "Reminiscences of Aunt Betty Hummons" (Milward 1927: 4), Elizabeth Harbeson describes the moment when a squad of Union soldiers conscripted her nineteen-year-old brother.

They took him to work on the entrenchments at Speagel Hill where the Union fortifications were. When Mother came from town Dr. Ayres said to her, 'Those infernal blue bellied Yankees have taken my boy. I'll give you a note to them. Go out these ad try to get him back. Tell them he is your son.' She went away but came back without him saying the soldiers said to tell Dr. Ayres, 'If he didn't mind out they would come back and get him.'

Union Garrison

A number of different Union forces were garrisoned at Fort Clay, including: the 1st Wisconsin Heavy Artillery Regiment, Battery "B;" the 1st Ohio Heavy Artillery, Cos. "F" and "I;" the 4th Kentucky Cavalry (detachment); the 21st Massachusetts Regiment; and the 48th Pennsylvania Volunteers, Cos. "B" and "H." Additional units were garrisoned at the fort, but official Army records don't always differentiate whether they were stationed at Fort Clay or downtown Lexington.

After 1864, United States Colored Troops were stationed at Fort Clay, and downtown Lexington, (Dyer 1908; Trowbridge 1997). These U.S.C.T units include: 5th Regiment Cavalry - engaged at Lexington October 19, 1864; 115th Regiment Infantry - garrison duty at Lexington, October 22-December 1864; 13th Regiment Heavy Artillery – garrison duty Lexington, 1865. Additional U.S.C.T. Infantry Regiments were deployed for garrison duty in the Department of Kentucky, including the 120th, 121st, 123rd, and 124th. Mr. Robert Bell, Historian, The 12th United States Heavy Artillery, found a correspondence that suggests U.S.C.T troops from Camp Nelson, a large recruitment and training center in Jessamine County, were assigned to work on the fortifications in Lexington. Mr. Bell also found an official report from November 15, 1864 describing Fort Clay's armaments: eight 20 pound Parrott rifles; one 6 pound James rifle; one 12 pound brass howitzer; and two 10 inch mortars.

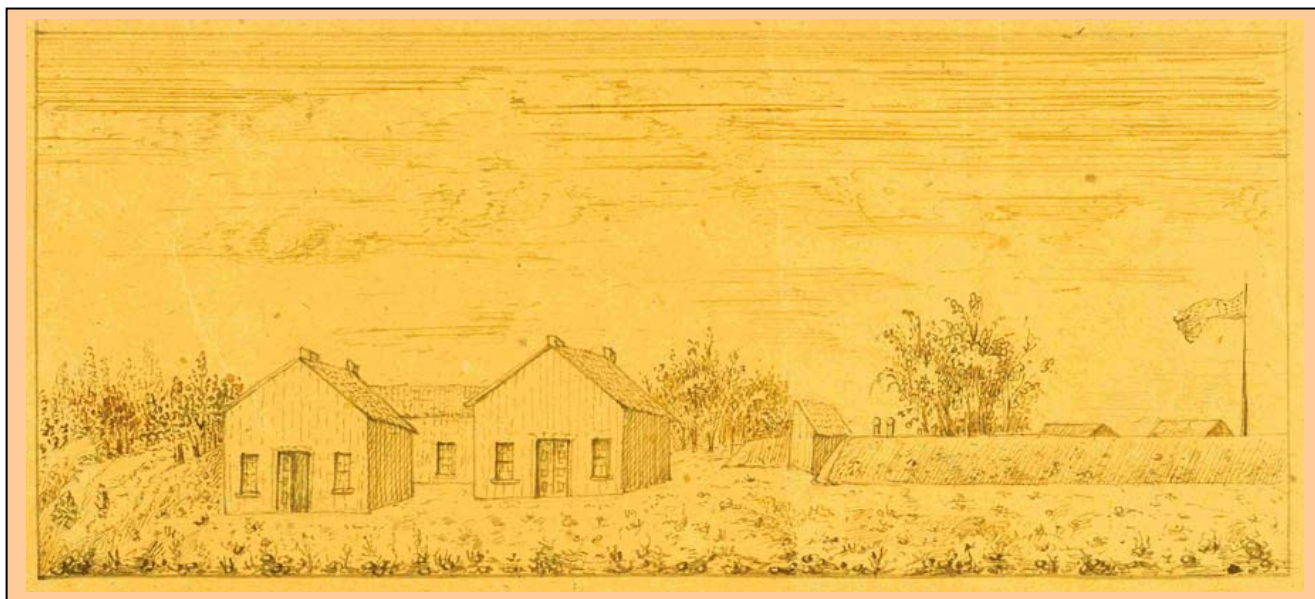


Figure: FC3 "View of Barracks and Fortifications at Fort Clay near Lexington KY." (ca, 1863). This elevation sketch, drawn west of the fort near Versailles Pike, shows the main gate, barracks main and the southern ridge of the Davis Bottom valley (far left). Courtesy, National Archives.

Service and Battle

Fort Clay was pressed into battle on June 8, 1864 during Confederate General John Hunt Morgan's final raid of Lexington. (Coleman 1938) After sacking Mt. Sterling, General Morgan entered the city with about 2,700 men to procure horses and supplies. Union troops based in downtown fled for the protection of Fort Clay, which had a garrison of 800 men, including about 300 U.S. Colored Troops. Confederate troops looted Lexington (Morgan's hometown) and set fire to several buildings north of downtown to make their forces look more imposing. Fort Clay's artillery batteries fired numerous salvos at the Confederate soldiers setting fire to stockpiles of wood at the Kentucky Central Railroad building near the Lunatic Asylum (now Eastern States Hospital). In his book, "Lexington Heart of the Bluegrass," author John D. Wright, Jr. (Wright 1982::91) cites an account of the artillery fire by the Reverend William Pratt.

It looked frightful and we feared the town would be set on fire. The federal forces retired to Fort Clay and commenced throwing shells over the town. It was frightful to see those missiles of death whizzing over our heads.

Lexington KY and its Defences

There are at least two additional maps of Fort Clay. One, "Lexington KY and its Defenses," shows the locations of Fort Clay and Fort Crittenden in relationship to Lexington and its strategic roads and rail lines.



Figure: FC4 "Lexington KY and its Defences," Fort Clay planned and constructed in 1863 under the direction of Brig. Gen'l. Q.A. Gillmore, by Captain. T.B. Brooks, N.Y. Vol. Engrs. Fort Crittenden in 1864 or '65 under the direction of Lt. Col. J.H. Simpson, Corps Engrs., by W.A. Gunn, C.E. Office U.S. Engineers, Cincinnati, O. June 1865. Courtesy, National Archives (drawer 132, Sheet 49).

Fort Clay, Lexington KY

Kentucky Transportation Cabinet scholars also secured a pen and ink sketch of Fort Clay (Fig. FC4) drawn by Samuel Goss on October 4, 1863. Goss served as a Corporal in the 1st Ohio Heavy Artillery (Co. "I"). The Goss sketch, a 8x12-inch pen and ink drawing, was donated by Mrs. Dorris C. Chambers to the Smithsonian in 1954. It shows more detail about the location of batteries, a commissary and the tents of officers.

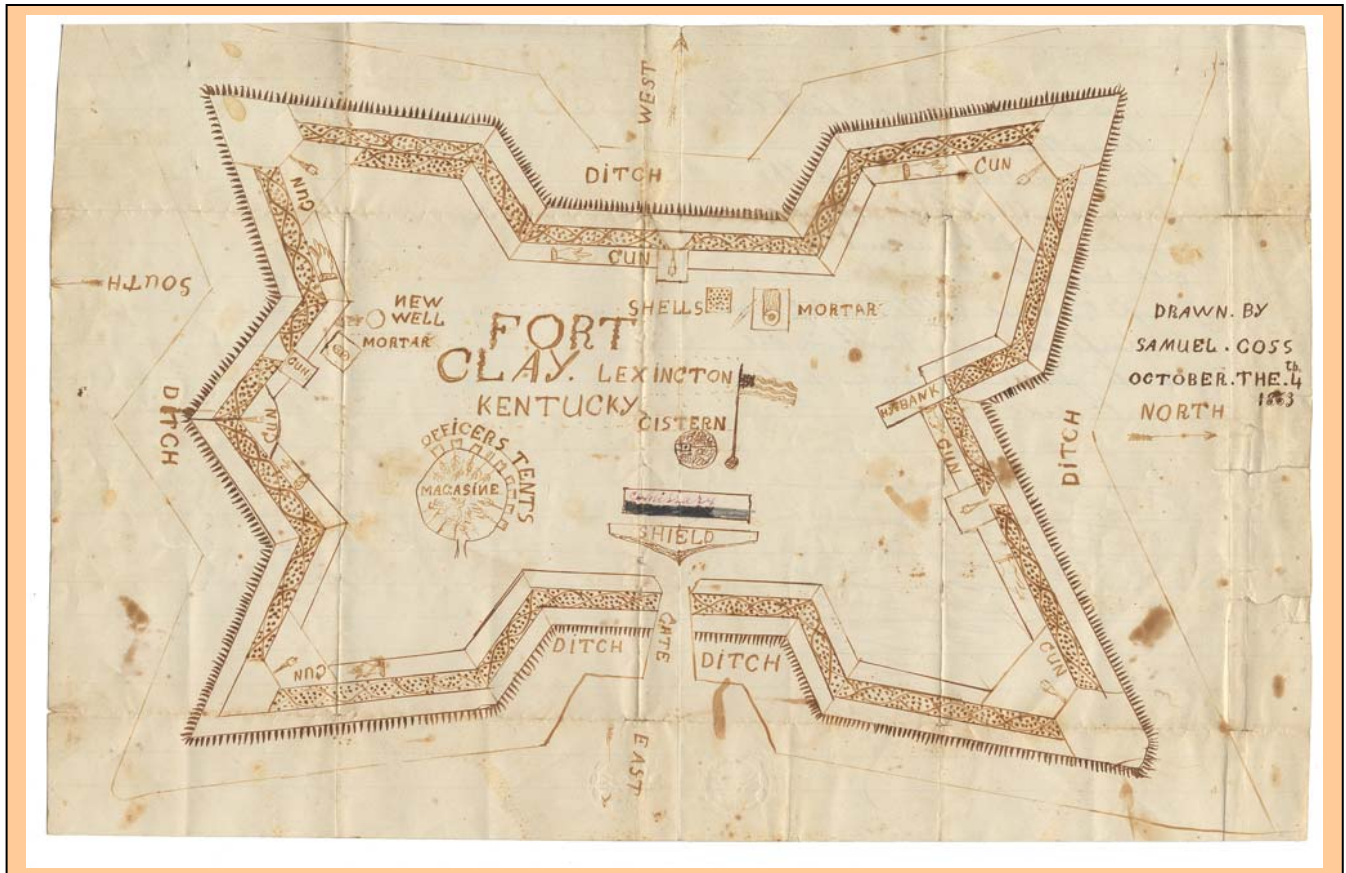


Figure: FC4 "Fort Clay, Lexington Kentucky" drawn by Samuel Goss, October 4, 1863. Courtesy, Division of Armed Forces History, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution.

The Fort Clay site

After Fort Clay was decommissioned, G.D. Wilgus had a brickyard on the site from about 1868 to 1877. The Cincinnati Southern Railroad built tracks near the Fort Clay site in the late 1870s. The site became the Gentry Brothers Stock Yards by 1887. Today, several commercial businesses occupy the site within an industrial complex off Angliana Avenue. An historical marker along Versailles Road memorializes Fort Clay. No archaeological investigations have been completed at the site of Fort Clay. Several scholars continue to research its history, including possible connections between the U.S.C.T. Troops garrisoned at Fort Clay and U.S.C.T veterans who were among the first generation of residents in Davis Bottom.

Contributing scholars:

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Dyer, Frederick H.

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Trowbridge, John M.

ca, 1997 *Unit History of Kentucky's African American Civil War Soldiers*, compiled by John M. Trowbridge, for the Center for Excellence for the Study of Kentucky African Americans, Frankfort, KY.