



MONOCACY NATIONAL BATTLEFIELD
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Plaster Preservation at Best and Worthington Farms

By Jana Friesen McCabe

If you peek in the windows of the Best or Worthington houses, you may easily think that no one has worked on the house interiors for many years. There are areas with missing plaster and the houses are far from habitable condition. But as the old adage goes, looks can be deceiving.

In 2020, the National Park Service (NPS) completed a plaster preservation project at the Best and Worthington farms. The project preserved the historic walls and ceilings in the main and secondary houses at Best and Worthington. Over a period of seven months, highly skilled craftspeople repaired, re-keyed, and restored original plaster that was more than 170 years old. At Worthington, the work included stabilizing the *trompe l'oeil*, or decorative painting, in the hallway and parlor. At Best, craftspeople addressed lead paint and damaged wood to preserve the more than 200-year-old plaster in the main and secondary houses.

For centuries, prior to the invention of modern drywall, plaster was the finish of choice for interior walls. [NPS Preservation Brief 21](#) describes plaster as “[a] versatile material...[that] could be applied over brick, stone, half-timber, or frame construction. It provided a durable surface that was easy to clean and that could be applied to flat or curved walls and ceilings.” Its versatility and simple ingredients meant it could be found in both the grandest buildings and the simplest dwellings.

At the time the Best and Worthington buildings were constructed, plaster was made from four ingredients: lime, aggregate, fiber, and water. Lime was and is abundant in the Frederick region. In 2012, archeologists discovered the remains of a lime kiln near the entrance road to Best Farm. They believe that kiln was used by enslaved laborers to process lime for agriculture and construction during the Vincendieries’ occupation of the property (1794-1827). The Monocacy River could have provided the aggregate (sand) and water. Fiber was sourced from livestock: cows, hogs, or horses. While it is not certain, it is possible that the ingredients used to plaster the Best and Worthington buildings were sourced locally. Analysis of the ingredients of the lime can reveal important information about local industry, trade networks, and perhaps even climate. *Cont’d next page.*



Structural and temporary bracing on the first floor of the Best House. Preservationists restructured the bracing in the Best House to allow visitors better access during open house tours. Temporary bracing was used to hold historic plaster in place while it was repaired and reattached to the lathe.

Photo credit: National Park Service.

In addition to providing clues about its ingredients, original plasterwork can reveal information about the buildings and the people associated with them. *NPS Preservation Brief 21* says “Plaster in a historic building is like a family album. The handwriting of the artisans, the taste of the original occupants, and the evolving styles of decoration are embodied in the fabric of the building.” The *trompe l’oeil* decoration painted on the original plaster at Worthington has survived since the 1850s through a combination of care and neglect. The Worthingtons valued the decoration enough to maintain it and never paint over it during the more than half century they called the farm home. In the mid-20th century, when the new owners converted the building to house migrant workers, no one cared enough to paint over the outdated decorations. Because historic plaster walls and ceilings contribute to the historic character of a building and a site, NPS policy is to preserve and repair them when possible.

In 2018, the NPS conducted an assessment of the plaster in the Best primary and secondary dwellings and Worthington House. Both houses had spent decades as rental or tenant housing prior to the NPS acquiring the properties. All buildings suffered damage from water, pests, and time. Because of decades of termite damage, internal bracing was constructed on the first floor of the Best House to stabilize the building. Following their assessment, historic preservation specialists noted that all Worthington and Best structures exhibited “conditions that are related to the age, past use, and history of the buildings. These conditions include hairline, stress, and possibly structural cracks in the plaster; paint crazing and cracking on the walls, ceiling, and wooden doors, frames and windows; large areas where the plaster has detached from the wood lath and/or substrate on the walls or ceilings.” The preservationists recommended that Monocacy National Battlefield (MNB) take action to protect the historic plaster.

The degrading historic plaster also posed potential safety risks for staff and visitors. Falling plaster could hit someone and cause injuries. The NPS mitigated these risks through keeping the buildings closed and unoccupied most of the time; however, MNB staff still entered the buildings to maintain them and to conduct annual open houses for battlefield visitors. While limiting the amount of time people spent in the buildings and restricting locations where they were allowed to walk could mitigate risks to people, it did not address the risk to the historic buildings themselves.

From April to October 2020, contractors who specialize in historic plaster preservation worked to stabilize, repair, and salvage the walls and ceilings at Best and Worthington. Using a variety of techniques and traditional materials (lime, aggregate, and water minus the animal hair), they reattached and patched plaster. For the ceiling stabilization, the contractor braced the plaster back into place as best as possible and then removed floorboards from the rooms above. They then poured a plaster slurry mix between the floorboards that ran between the lath and re-keyed the plaster back into place. Once the slurry was dry the bracing could be removed and the plaster was once again stable. Where plaster loss had already occurred, they stabilized and smoothed the edges to prevent moisture intrusion and further damage. All of the work was documented and mapped to each structure and room.

As a result of this project, the original plaster will be around for years to come and MNB will once again be able to open up for annual house tours. Unlike a project in a private home, the goal of the plaster preservation project was not restore the walls to a “new” or “livable” condition but instead to save and stabilize as much of the historic material as possible. Stabilizing the structures preserves the buildings for the future, but it also reduces risks to visitors and the structures during the open house tours.

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Modern 2x4 supports surround a historic log support in the basement of Worthington House. The modern framing secures the historic plaster snugly against the lathe so specialists can rekey it by pouring a plaster slurry on it from above. Prior to the stabilization of the ceiling plaster in the Worthington basement, visitors were limited to standing near the doorway during open house tours and therefore unable to look out the cellar window as young Glenn Worthington had during the battle.

Photo credit: National Park Service.



Preservation specialists use a variety of techniques to stabilize and preserve the original plaster in the Worthington basement. Wood supports close the gaps between the plaster and the lathe. Anchors help secure the plaster in place. Edges are smoothed and sealed to prevent moisture infiltration and future damage. Finally, a slurry of plaster will be poured from above to rekey the plaster to the lathe.

Photo credit: National Park Service.

Companies A & E, Third Regiment, Maryland Potomac Home Brigade at Monocacy

By Daniel Carroll Toomey (copyright 2021)

During the summer of 1861, former Maryland governor Francis Thomas (1842-1845) suggested to the US Secretary of War that a brigade of four regiments be raised specifically to guard the crossings of the Potomac River in Western Maryland. He further stipulated that these troops would not leave the State of Maryland. General James Cooper, a native of Frederick County, was to be its commanding officer. Three regiments were successfully recruited but by August of 1862, the Fourth Regiment had failed to meet its recruiting goals and the brigade concept was abandoned as was the restriction to stay within the state's boundaries.

The three regiments were assigned to different divisions and only fought in the near company of each other when they were captured just prior to the battle of Antietam at Harpers Ferry in September of 1862. After that the Third Regiment's main duty was guarding the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad. The Spring of 1864 found the Third Regiment as part of General Erastus B. Tyler's First Separate Brigade operating between Relay and Monocacy Junction. During this time two additional companies were added to the regiment: Company I, recruited at Ellicott's Mills, and Company K recruited at Monrovia.

Just prior to the battle of Monocacy, Company E was stationed at Mt. Airy. Private John T. Reck of the company wrote his sister a letter on May 5, 1864:

*"Camp Mount Airy
Baltimore & Ohio Rail Road*

We are still at Mount Airy and expect to remain here this coming summer as the colonel has moved his Headquarters to Monrovia eight miles up the road from us and from the preparations they are making on the line of the road shows that we will remain where we are unless the rebels should invade Maryland again which I think they never will."

Two months later Private Reck found himself fighting unexpectedly in the battle of Monocacy. Reck served from April 10, 1862, to April 10, 1865.

Also stationed at Mount Airy was Company A, commanded by Captain James Inskeep. Captain Inskeep enlisted as a private September 12, 1861 and served until January 2, 1865. He was promoted to First Lieutenant January 9, 1863 and to Captain April 22, 1864.

With the approach of General Early's army in the summer of 1864, Colonel Charles Gilpin ordered his scattered companies to form up and move to Monocacy Junction. On July 7, 1864, General Lew Wallace ordered the regiment to move by train and reinforce his men fighting the Confederate advance west of Frederick City. When a strong Rebel force was seen moving towards the Union left flank, it became obvious to General Wallace that Washington, not Baltimore, was Early's main target. Wallace was forced to give up Frederick and align his meager forces along the east bank of the Monocacy River in an attempt to delay Early's advance. The Third Regiment of the Maryland Potomac Home Brigade was stationed in detachments between the Stone Bridge on the National Road and the blockhouse guarding the B&O's bridge over the river. Company A was north of the bridge and skirmished along the river. Company E supported the guns of Alexander's battery. At the end of the battle, the regiment joined the general retreat to Ellicott's Mills. Total losses for the regiment were 20 killed, 7 wounded and 15 missing.

Daniel Carroll Toomey is the author of many books on the Civil War including The Civil War in Maryland and The War Came by Train: The Baltimore & Ohio Railroad During the Civil War.

Lew Wallace: Prelude to Shiloh

By Gail Stephens

As discussed in the last issue of *The Dispatch* (Summer 2021), Lew Wallace had performed well in the fighting at Fort Donelson and he was awarded accordingly. On March 21, 1862, he received his second star, a reward given Wallace and his fellow Donelson division commanders by a grateful President Lincoln and Congress. At the age of 35 and after less than a year in the army, Lew Wallace was a major general, the highest rank possible at the time.

Wallace's career was on the rise but disaster lay ahead at the battle of Shiloh on April 6, 1862. After the fighting at Forts Henry and Donelson, Grant's army began its movement up the Tennessee River into the heart of the Confederacy on March 10. Wallace wrote of it: "The most magnificent sight I ever saw was the sixty steamers composing our fleet, one by one drop out into line for the expedition. Say what you will, war has its attraction, or I might better say its fascinations."

The Union army's target was Corinth, Mississippi, where the Confederate commander in the West, General Albert Sidney Johnston, had retreated with his army after the loss of Forts Henry and Donelson. There Johnston joined the Mississippi Valley force led by General P.G.T. Beauregard. Johnston, the senior of the two would command their combined force of about 44,000 men. Two railroads crucial to control of the South crossed at Corinth, the east-west Memphis and Charleston line (referred to as "the vertebrae of the Confederacy") and the north-south Mobile and Ohio line.

Major General Henry Halleck, now in overall command of Union forces in the West, sent Grant's army up the Tennessee to seize the river landings closest to Corinth and then await another Union army marching overland from Nashville. Halleck believed the combined armies would give him the force to defeat Johnston and seize Corinth. It would be, Halleck said, a battle to "culminate the war in the West."

Grant's headquarters was at Savannah, Tennessee, on the east side of the river where he could await the Union force marching from Nashville. Five of Grant's six divisions were sent to Pittsburg Landing, on the western side of the Tennessee and nine miles upriver from Savannah. Lew Wallace's division was stationed at Crump's Landing, also on the west side of the river but only four miles upriver from Savannah. Thus Grant was separated from his army and Grant's army was separated into two pieces. Supremely confident after their relatively easy victory at Fort Donelson, Grant and his army expected to be allowed to occupy separate points deep in enemy territory, wait for reinforcements, and then move against a strategic point without themselves being attacked. It could not and would not be true.

Part of the pending crisis was Halleck's fault. From far away in St. Louis, he put the brakes on Grant, telling his aggressive commander repeatedly to avoid bringing on an engagement and to wait for the army from Nashville. But Grant was also at fault because he did not have a permanent presence at Pittsburg Landing and in the absence of their overall commander the divisions there had very little cohesion. As Lew Wallace wrote in 1863, the largest army organization at the landing was the division, "leaving the force in the hands of too many men all independent of each other. The old saw about the cooks and the broth comes in very pertinently." *Continued next page.*

Confederate commander Johnston knew that another Union army was marching to join Grant so, though his newly-formed army contained many green recruits, he decided on April 2 to attack the Pittsburg Landing force before the reinforcements arrived. Grant did not know this was in the works. He had no scouts, believing that by seizing the initiative he had “shifted the burden of uncertainty – and the need for intelligence” to Southern commanders. In addition, the position of his force at Pittsburg Landing was strong. The five divisions were camped on a broad, well-watered plateau, protected on two sides by the river and three broad, deep streams, thus channeling the path of any Confederate attack. The two main roads from Corinth, 23 miles away, ran through the Union camps. Union gunboats on the river could provide protection.

Why was Lew Wallace’s division posted alone at Crump’s Landing, five miles downriver from the divisions at Pittsburg Landing? He was guarding their rear. Bethel Station on the Mobile and Ohio Railroad was only twenty miles west of Crump’s Landing via a good road. If Crump’s was left unguarded, the Confederates could easily move troops by rail from Corinth to Bethel Station and march the 20 miles east to interdict vital river communications between Savannah and Pittsburg Landing, isolating Grant from his army. In addition, the plan for the Union advance was to move concentrically on Corinth via several different roads. From Crump’s Landing, Wallace was in a position to come in on a road further to the west than the divisions at Pittsburg Landing.

Wallace needed to have a secure land link with the rest of the army. Two roads were available to him: the River Road, which ran along the Tennessee River to Pittsburg Landing, and a road known as the Shunpike, which headed southwest and connected with the division on the Union right. After a reconnaissance, Wallace’s cavalry commander told him the River Road was deeply flooded by the spring rains while the higher, drier Shunpike would serve the purpose well with some work. Wallace chose the Shunpike and put gangs of men to work restoring the road and rebuilding the bridges. By the end of March, it was “in condition to send or bring a battery over it on the run.”

However, the only man Wallace told of his plan to use the Shunpike was Brigadier General W.H.L. Wallace, commander of the Second Division and the man Grant had ordered to reinforce him in case of attack on Crump’s Landing. This was the crux of Wallace’s problem; Grant did not know the road Wallace planned to use. Instead, Grant and his staff presumed Wallace would take the River Road. In addition, neither Grant nor his staff had ever ridden any of the roads between Pittsburg Landing and Crump’s Landing, so they knew nothing of the terrain.

The whole issue of the road is key, and indicative of a lack of professionalism on the part of Wallace and Grant. Neither man talked to the other about their plans for movement in the presence of a hostile army. This absence of even minimal communication between the two generals and their staffs led to a fatal lack of knowledge, which would have serious consequences for both men at Shiloh on April 6, and a lifetime of unpleasant consequences for Wallace.

Gail Stephens is an historian and author of Shadow of Shiloh: Major General Lew Wallace in the Civil War and numerous other articles and monographs.

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*This issue’s photos are from park
visitor - Lynn Bristol*

