

History of Fort Eustis

Fort Eustis and the land it resides on have a rich history dating back to the beginning of American colonial history. Mulberry Island is actually a peninsula bounded on three sides by the Warwick River, James River and Skiffes Creek that was settled shortly after the first colonists arrived at Jamestown in 1607. Three years later, the destitute survivors had started their return trip to England when Baron de La War met them with provisions and new settlers at Mulberry Island. John Rolfe, who married Pocahontas, cultivated tobacco on Mulberry Island for the first time in the colonies creating America's first cash crop, which accelerated the European immigration to the new world. The Matthew Jones House survives as a reminder of this colonial period and an example of an early eighteenth century earthfast structure converted to brick.

The strategic military importance of the Chesapeake Bay was not realized until the British invasion during the War of 1812 and the focus thereafter was on the defense of the harbor and access up the James River. During the Civil War, the Confederate Army of the Peninsula, under the command of Major General John B. Magruder, constructed Fort Crafford on the southwestern corner of Mulberry Island as part of an elaborate defense with Fort Huger on the opposite bank to prevent the Union Navy from advancing up the James to threaten Richmond. Its strategic location made it part of the Second Magruder Line that stretched from Lee's Mill to Yorktown. To defend Fort Crafford from any overland approach from the Warwick River, Magruder mapped out an additional series of earthworks. The Confederacy abandoned them during their retreat up the Peninsula in 1862 and most remain visible today.

With the United States entry into World War I in April 1917, the War Department required vast tracts of land to train its rapidly expanding army. On March 7, 1918, the government purchased Mulberry Island for \$538,000 as a Coastal Artillery replacement training center and balloon observation school. Camp Eustis was named in honor of Brevet Brigadier General Abraham Eustis, Commandant of the Artillery School of Practice from 1824 to 1834. The uninhabited land bounded by water on three sides provided an ideal impact area for artillery. The camp laid miles of railroad track for its railway guns. Camp Eustis trained over 21,000 soldiers for the war. This began a long military history that would survive several base reductions in the future.

While most military camps fell into disuse after the Great War, in 1923 this camp became Fort Eustis, a permanent military installation garrisoning infantry and artillery troops until 1931. Then the Treasury Department established a federal prison there to house the overflow of bootleggers sentenced of violating Prohibition. After the repeal of Prohibition in 1933, the prison population declined and the Work Progress Administration (WPA) garrisoned its labor force there while working on nearby public work projects.

With World War II waging in Europe and Asia, Fort Eustis became a training center for Anti-Aircraft Artillery in 1940. This led to the first facelift of the installation. All new temporary wooden construction replaced any earlier structures. After training more than 20,000 soldiers, the school moved away leaving the naval hospital and compound for German and Italian prisoners. This had, however, restarted the long history of Fort Eustis as an Army training base.

Instead of closing after the war, Fort Eustis found a new tenant. In 1946, the US Army Transportation School relocated there to consolidate its officer, maritime, stevedore, rail and amphibious training. The school selected the fort because it had a functioning rail line, sheltered access to the sea for a port and a beach landing training site nearby at Fort Story. This began the brick and mortar phase of permanent structures on Fort Eustis. From then on Fort Eustis would serve as the home of the Transportation Corps until 2010.

Because of the new occupant, Fort Eustis acquired some structures unique to an Army installation. It already had a rail line from its World War I past. The rail loop was jokingly referred to as the MG&B (Main Gate and Back) Railroad. To provide berthing for the Army's watercraft fleet, the Army constructed a pier in 1947 and named the military port facility after Third Port, a major port of debarkation which operated in North Africa and Southern France during World War II. Similar to the US Navy's Atlantic Fleet downriver at Norfolk, Third Port offered the much smaller Army's navy a platform from which to deploy. To train its stevedores, the Transportation School constructed a concrete replica of a cargo vessel known as the land ship or "SS Never Sail." The functioning military port also provided a home for the Army divers of the Engineer Corps and dive school until the Army divers began training with the US Navy in 1973. Third Port would give Fort Eustis its most significant characteristic making it different from any other Army fort. It was the only fort with a port.

In 1950, the Army Transportation Corps assumed responsibility for the development of helicopters and that year, the US Army Aviation Applied Technology Directorate (AATD) became another tenant on Fort Eustis. It had responsibility to design and develop the different types of Army helicopters; and in 1954, the post constructed the first airfield designed specifically for helicopters. Felker Heliport (later Felker Army Airfield) had a wheel-shaped design with two bisecting 600-foot air strips and eight helo-pads resembling a ship's wheel. This design was eventually replaced by the linear runway capable of handling fixed wing aircraft. Fort Eustis would also become the home for Army aviation maintenance training in June 1954, which evolved into the US Army Aviation Logistics School in 1983 when Aviation became a separate branch of the Army.

Third Port and access to the sea made Fort Eustis the ideal location for the 48th Transportation Group, the Army's only port opening capability, and the railroad served to train the Army's only active duty railroad division with two rail battalions. To house them, the post constructed hammer-shaped, three-story, cinderblock barracks to replace the World War II temporary wooden barracks. The 48th Group supported annual logistics over the shore operations in the Arctic Circle and northern coast of France. Fort Eustis trained up all the railway battalions for the Korean War. After the war, the Army no longer deployed railway operating battalions and only one railway battalion, the 714th Transportation Battalion, remained on active duty at Fort Eustis until its inactivation in 1972. Meanwhile the majority of the 48th Group deployed to the Republic of Vietnam during that war and was subsequently replaced by the reactivated 7th Transportation Group. Unlike the history of the 48th Group, the rich history of port operations during World War II and Korea perfectly matched the current mission of the 7th Group. So the Transportation group and railway organization would join the Transportation School as the major occupant on post. Amid the variety of tenants, the Transportation Corps for six decades would have the largest footprint on the installation.

During the massive troop buildup for the Vietnam War, Fort Eustis trained up many Transportation units that would deploy to Vietnam. In addition, the Transportation School activated a Transportation Corps Officer Candidate School to meet the high demand for officers. To house and train these soldiers the post erected prefabricated metal buildings adjacent to the aviation maintenance school.

After the Vietnam War, the subordinate battalions were redesignated to the previous battalions that had deployed to Vietnam but the 7th Group retained its unit designation. It would conduct port opening and joint logistics over the shore operations in Operation Desert Shield/Desert Storm, Somalia, Haiti, and Operation Iraqi Freedom. The Vietnam War brought about a significant change in deployments. The majority of soldiers would travel by air and the equipment by sea. Nearby Langley Air Force Base and Third Port provided force projection platforms for both air and sea deployments.

Originally begun as a display of military transportation artifacts in an abandoned World War II storage building in 1959, the Army Transportation Museum moved to its current five-acre location near the main gate in 1976, the result of construction paid for with private funds raised by its museum foundation. It has continued to grow into one of the Army's largest museums preserving the Army's heritage through the history of transportation. Its inspirational regimental room, renovated in 2011, has made the museum a favorite place for classes, social functions, graduations, promotions, retirement and change of command ceremonies.

With the end of the Cold War, the Department of Defense began reducing the size of its force structure and consequently began closing military bases as part of the Peace Dividend. The 1995 Base Realignment, Allocation and Closure (BRAC) Act recommended closing two major military ocean terminals, which abolished the Eastern and Western Area Commands of the Military Traffic Management Command (MTMC). Consequently, MTMC replaced these two commands with the Deployment Support Command (DSC) established at Fort Eustis in 1997. This brought a second general officer headquarters to Fort Eustis.

In 2004, MTMC was later redesignated as the Surface Deployment Distribution Command (SDDC) to meet its increasing responsibility for deployment during the Global War on Terrorism. After having deployed twice to Kuwait, the 7th Transportation Group was reorganized and redesignated a multi-functional sustainment brigade in 2006 and subsequently deployed to Iraq and then Afghanistan. Anticipating the reorganization of the 7th Transportation Group into a multifunctional sustainment brigade headquarters, the DSC moved the 597th Transportation Brigade to Fort Eustis in 2005 in order to provide a brigade level transportation headquarters in the event it was needed. The earthquake response in Haiti in 2010 validated this move and the port opening mission required the reorganization of the sustainment brigade back to a terminal service headquarters, 7th Transportation Brigade (Expeditionary).

In 2006, the US Army activated the Installation Management Command to provide single management of Army installations. Prior to that, the Commander of Fort Eustis also wore two other hats, the Chief of Transportation and Commandant of the Transportation School. This new

organization relieved the two-star general of responsibility for base support and allowed him to focus his energy on the branch and school.

The 2005 Base Realignment, Allocation and Closure (BRAC) Act resulted in the greatest change in the look of Fort Eustis. In an effort to combine like-minded schools, the Army Transportation School relocated its headquarters down the road to Fort Lee in 2010 taking only leaders and movement control instruction. Because of the need for a military port, it left its cargo handling and maritime training, along with rail training, the museum and regimental chapel at Fort Eustis. The Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) Headquarters replaced it in 2011. By then nearly all the World War II structures had been replaced and massive new structures gave the post the appearance of the home of a major four-star command. This decision also resulted in the consolidation of the Deployment Support Command with its parent Surface Deployment Distribution Command at Scott Air Force Base, Illinois. Just as significant, the BRAC decision consolidated adjoining bases of different services, referred to as joint basing. Resultantly Fort Eustis and Langley Air Force Base were consolidated under the responsibility of the Air Force 633rd Air Base Wing as Joint Base Langley-Eustis in 2010.

March 2018 will mark the centennial of the establishment of Fort Eustis. Mulberry Island's historical importance dates back to the beginning of the English settlement of Virginia. The Confederacy, however, first recognized the military importance of the area but only because the Union still controlled Fortress Monroe and the Chesapeake Bay. As a later federal military installation, Fort Eustis has seen great change in its mission and had many facelifts. It has provided the primary home for the Army's navy, divers, rail and port opening capability. Since World War I, it has trained soldiers of the Artillery, Coastal Artillery, Anti-Aircraft Artillery, Aviation Maintenance, Engineer Corps and Transportation Corps, and finally became the home for the Major Army Command responsible for this training. It has survived repeated base closures because of its unique characteristics and future potential for the Army.