

PAMPLIN PARK DEPICTS CIVIL WAR'S FINAL CAMPAIGN

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A Pamplin Historical Park employee dressed as a Confederate soldier stands at "Right Shoulder – Shift" in front of an artillery emplacement on the lines of the old Petersburg battlefield.

PETERSBURG, Virginia (AP) --For months, Confederate soldiers manned earthen fortifications that snaked across the Piedmont south of Richmond, desperately trying to keep their Union counterparts from cutting off the main supply route to the besieged Confederate capital.

Then, on the morning of April 2, 1865, the defense line broke. Thousands of Union soldiers poured into the city of Petersburg, forcing Gen. Robert E. Lee to abandon his position and evacuate Richmond. He surrendered a week later.

Although it proved to be the decisive victory for the North, the Petersburg Campaign is one of the least-studied periods of the war, and, as a result, draws few visitors to battlefields south of Richmond. But one family with ties to the region dating back 200 years is attempting to change this with a sprawling historical park dedicated to telling the story of this final chapter, often called "the Waterloo of the Confederacy."

With a clever mix of high-tech gadgetry and painstaking historical detail, the \$34 million Pamplin Historical Park also endeavors to show what everyday life was like for soldiers and Southerners back then -- a Colonial Williamsburg of the Confederacy.

"You will believe you have gone through the Civil War," said Dr. Robert B. Pamplin Jr., millionaire owner of the park.

The journey begins in the plush National Museum of the Civil War Soldier. Choosing a real-life infantryman from the war, visitors follow their soldier as he enlists, marches to the front line and

fighters in his first battle, listening to the soldier's actual diary entries and letters through a CD Walkman. At the end of the exhibit, visitors find out if their soldier lives or dies.

More than 3,000 Civil War artifacts are also on display -- everything from chess sets to lice combs. But the museum's main draw is its interactive displays. In one room, visitors find themselves facing hundreds of armed soldiers on a wall-length video of a battlefield. The men slowly raise their guns, then fire, sending bullets whizzing past visitors' ears (felt as blasts of air from the ceiling) and causing the floor to shake.



A costumed interpreter cleans his rifle barrel at a campsite on the grounds of Pamplin Historical Park, near Petersburg,

Outside, the bullets are real.

Costumed interpreters conduct daily rifle-loading and shooting demonstrations, and twice a day during the summer, they fire an ear-shattering cannon. "You feel it, you taste it, you hear it -- it is loud," says spokesman John Campbell.

The park's re-creation of a typical Petersburg battlefield looks more like the trench warfare of World War I. Confederate soldiers hid behind 8-foot-tall fortifications made of dirt, firing at Union troops as they maneuvered through various barriers -- a type of wooden barbed-wire known as abatis -- sharpened stakes pointing out of the ground -- and a 6-foot-deep trench.

The final obstacle was the earthen wall itself.

"Anybody climbing over those walls had to have the greatest level of fearlessness," Pamplin said. "It makes World War I look like a cakewalk. ... It's just amazing what these people were willing to do."

The original Confederate earthworks remain, as well, stretching for almost two miles under a cloak of trees behind the park. It was here that the first Union breakthrough of the Petersburg Campaign took place. Nearly 1,100 Northern soldiers died in 20 minutes that morning in 1865, but 15 hours later, the Stars and Stripes flew above the city of Petersburg.

Beside the trail, visitors will also find an authentic Civil War-era camp, where uniformed men chop wood, cook meals and clean their weapons -- much as they would have 140 years ago. The camp is crude; beds made out of wooden planks and pine needles reinforce just how miserable the conditions were at the time.

Life on the farm wasn't much better. At another re-created section of the park, men in overalls toil in the sun-baked fields growing tobacco and corn, pulling weeds and removing tobacco worms by hand.



Modern-day farming methods or implements are nonexistent. Even the seeds are from another era -- they come from a special 19th century batch that has been propagated over the years by scientists at Virginia Tech. The crops produce smaller ears of corn and leaves of tobacco.

"Everyone today is used to corn on the cob, but that became popular after the Civil War," said Gary Helm, who used to run the farming program at Pamplin. "Most of the corn grown back then was for feeding animals."

A costumed interpreter fires a blank round from his rifle over the top of sandbagged entrenchments at Pamplin Historical Park.

The park has plenty of those, too. Helm said he traveled to Missouri to find a purebred variety of chicken that was dominant then, known as "Domineckers." The birds have fuller feathers and are smaller than modern-day chickens.

It's the attention to historical accuracy that drives Pamplin's vision of the park. His plan was to create a homogenous war experience, taking the best attributes of museums and battlefield sites to make something entirely new.

"When the site came available, we recognized the historical significance and we were in a position to develop it," he said. "It came out just great."

Pamplin's ancestors built the plantation home that still stands on the site in the early 1800s. It was occupied during the war by a South Carolina brigadier and his troops, and afterward, was purchased by a Northern family. The family's descendants lived on the property until 1994, when it was put up for sale.

Pamplin's father, Robert B. Pamplin Sr., was born near the present site of the park and made his fortune in the wood products business as CEO of Georgia-Pacific. After retiring in 1976, he and his son began a corporation with business interests across the country, one of which became the Pamplin Historical Park.

The Pamplins envision a \$70 million total investment on the 422-acre site before the 150th anniversary of the start of the Civil War in 2011.