



Edgar Allan Poe



The noted American author Edgar Allan Poe was stationed at Fort Moultrie from 1827 to 1828. Poe's military experience provided the discipline he sought and his brief stay here on Sullivan's Island inspired some of his earliest, and most popular literary works.

Stormy Beginnings

Edgar Allan Poe was born in Boston in 1809, coincidentally the same year that the present Fort Moultrie was built. He was the second of three children born to traveling actors - David and Elizabeth Poe. Orphaned at the age of two in Richmond, Virginia, he was taken in by the affluent Allan family. However, Poe never felt that he was fully accepted by his foster father John Allan, the frugal Scottish businessman. The two men shared a stormy relationship. Poe acquired his first military experience at the age of fifteen when he became lieutenant of a military unit called the Junior Morgan Riflemen Volunteers. This unit was

organized as a guard of honor for General Lafayette's visit to Richmond in 1824. In February 1826, Poe enrolled in the University of Virginia at Charlottesville. He excelled in his studies but did not possess self-discipline. His attempts to maintain the same lifestyle as his classmates, and gambling debts, caused the young Poe to become indebted. By the time he dropped out of school in December 1826, he had accumulated a debt of nearly \$2,500.00. As his debts grew, so did the split between Poe and Allan. As a result of his estranged relationship with Allan, Poe moved to Boston, Massachusetts in March 1827.

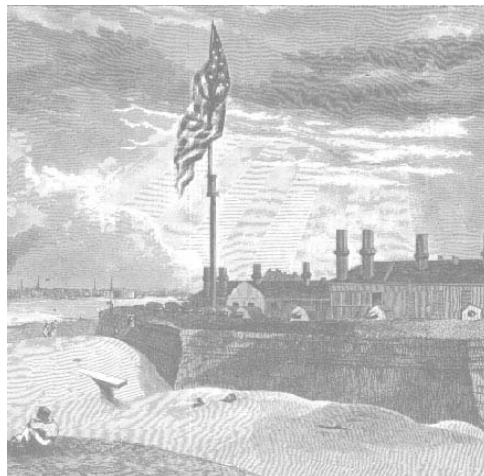
Private Edgar A. Perry

On May 26, 1827 Poe enlisted in the U.S. Army as a private for a five year term. He entered under the assumed name of Edgar A. Perry. He further deceived the army by claiming to be twenty-two years of age, when he was only eighteen. Poe was more honest with his personal description: grey eyes, brown hair, fair complexion and 5' 8" in height. Poe would not grow his distinctive mustache until he was much older.

Poe was assigned to Battery H of the First Artillery at Fort Independence, Boston Harbor. On October 31, 1827 Battery H was ordered to Fort Moultrie on Sullivan's Island, South Carolina. His battery sailed on the Brigantine *Waltham*, arriving for duty in Charleston on November 18th.

At Fort Moultrie Poe was promoted to artificer, doubling his pay to \$10.00 per month. On December 11, 1828, Poe's battery set sail for duty in Fortress Monroe, Virginia. Poe attained the highest rank for a non-commissioned officer, Regimental Sergeant-Major, in only nineteen months. His military success could be attributed to many factors. The army was the first place where Poe felt he belonged. His high social standing and superior education elevated him above most other enlisted men. A fellow soldier at Fortress Monroe perhaps stated it best when he attributed Poe's success in the military to the fact the he was "*highly worthy of confidence.*"

Despite his military accomplishments, Poe's destiny would lay elsewhere. By the end of 1828, he decided to leave military service, and contacted John Allan.



"I have been in the American army as long as suits my ends or my inclination, and it is now time that I should leave it... The period of Enlistment is five years -- the prime of my life would be wasted..."

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Poe at West Point

Allan refused his ward's request for a discharge until Poe asked for help in obtaining an appointment to the United States Military Academy at West Point. Hiring a substitute to finish out his army enlistment, he was discharged from service on April 15, 1829.

While awaiting word of his acceptance as a cadet, Poe visited some of his family living in Baltimore. There he met his cousin and future wife, Virginia Clemm.

Poe entered West Point in July 1830. He excelled in his studies but he was still plagued by restlessness. In 1830 one of Poe's roommates described him as having "*the appearance of being much older. He had*

a worn, weary, discontented look, not easily forgotten by those who were intimate with him."

The academy's required four year commitment soon became burdensome and Poe felt it threatened his aspirations to become a writer. Unable to obtain permission to resign, Poe chose to neglect his duties. Before the end of his first year, Poe was court-martialed for "*gross neglect of duty*" and "*disobedience of orders.*" He left West Point on February 19, 1831.

Prior to leaving, he persuaded over one hundred cadets to contribute a dollar and a quarter each to finance the printing of a new edition of his poems.

Poe the Author

Poe went on to become one of America's greatest authors with such stories as The Murders in the Rue Morgue, The Pit and the Pendulum, The Tell-Tale Heart and poems like "The Raven." Along with literary success, he continued his life-long battles with drinking and poverty, both of which eventually defeated him. His final letter to his foster father from West Point a decade earlier was prophetic:

"The same difficulties are threatening me as before at Charlottesville – and I must resign...I have no more to say – except that my future life (which thank God will not endure long) must be passed in indigence and sickness."



The Gold Bug

Poe referred to South Carolina settings in several of his short stories such as The Balloon-Hoax and The Oblong Box, which trace their origins to his experiences on Sullivan's Island. By far the most important of these works was The Gold Bug,



originally published in 1843. The Gold Bug became one of the most popular stories ever published:

"This island is a very singular one. It consists of little else than the sea sand, and is about three miles long. Its breadth at no point exceeds a quarter of a mile. It is separated from the mainland by a scarcely perceptible creek, oozing its way through a wilderness of reeds and slime, a favorite resort of the marsh-hen. The vegetation, as might be supposed, is scant or at least dwarfish. No trees of any magnitude are to be seen. Near the western extremity, where Fort Moultrie stands, frame buidlings, tenanted, during summer, by the fugitives from Charleston dust and fever, may be found, indeed, the bristly palmetto; but the whole island, with the exception of this western point, and a line of hard, white beach on the seacoast, is covered with a dense undergrowth of the sweet myrtle, so much prized by the horticulturists of England. The shrub here often attains a heighth of fifteen or twenty feet, and forms an almost impenetrable coppice, burthening the air with its fragrance."

Death of a Poet

"Annabel Lee," one of Poe's best known poems, was published posthumously. Local legend suggests that the poem was written about a lady he met in Charleston. However, the "maiden" who inspired Poe was probably none other than his wife Virginia. Poe's first cousin was thirteen years old when they married in 1836. She died of consumption in 1847. Poe never recovered from this loss. In 1849 he was found lying unconscious on a Baltimore street. A few days later, on October 7th, Edgar Allan Poe uttered "*God help my poor soul,*" and died, at the age of 40. The exact cause of his death remains a mystery. He was buried in Westminster Cemetary in Baltimore, Maryland.

Fort Moultrie is a unit of Fort Sumter National Monument and is administered by the National Park Service. For additional information, write to the Superintendent, 1214 Middle Street, Sullivan's Island, South Carolina, 29482, call 843 883-3123 or visit the park on the World Wide Web:

www.nps.gov/fomo