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Deeply Rooted: Trees at the Foundation of America's Environmental History

The Civil War Defenses of Washington as microcosms of the nation's relationship with trees

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Fort Stevens in 1865. LIBRARY OF CONGRESS.

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Introduction to the Circle Forts

The Civil War Defenses of Washington, also known as the circle forts, are microcosms of the nation's relationship with trees. The perception of trees in the United States has varied by circumstance and time: a Confederate sharpshooter was grateful to hide in a tree, but members of the United States Army realized the tree was a mortal threat to President Lincoln. The use of the forts' land over time also reflects the priorities of varying moments of history within the city of Washington, DC as a whole.

Most of the Civil War Defenses of Washington were constructed in the wake of the resounding Confederate victory in 1861 at the First Battle of Bull Run. DC appeared vulnerable and needed fortifications built quickly. DC's role as the capital of the United States meant the city was crucial in preserving the nation—fortifying DC protected the young nation from threats to its survival and governmental function. DC is essentially a bowl surrounded by higher ridges overlooking the city below. This topography provided a perfect landscape for forts to encircle DC and protect the city on all sides. By late 1862, the forts had been nearly completely constructed and the city was transformed into the most heavily fortified city in North America.

This transformation also radically changed the city's landscape, with farmland turned into soldier's barracks and most trees felled within a mile or two of the forts. DC was no longer a mostly rural district with a more populated government center; instead, the city became essential to preserving our Constitution and united by an encircling military road. After the war, the forts were dismantled, and the city did not return to the rural district it once was. The farmland that had once stood in the forts' place had been devastated. In their place, a new American city grew with attention to modern business and industry different from its antebellum agricultural focus.

Focusing on the development of three fort circle parks—Fort Dupont, Fort Stevens, and Fort Marcy—highlights the fluctuating role of trees in the story of DC's growth into a modern city, from the Founding to our present day. Today, the circle forts provide unique locations of green space in the capital city, providing the perimeter of the city with access to nature and crucial ecosystem services, such as mental and physical health necessary for modern urban residents.

Fort Dupont is in Ward 7 of Washington, DC east of the Anacostia River. The Civilian Conservation Corps constructed the park from land that once served as a United States Army fort. The park opened in 1935. Today, Fort Dupont Park includes a hiking and biking trail across miles of woods, an outdoor concert venue, picnic grounds, and community gardens.

Fort Stevens is famous for being the site where Confederate soldiers attacked the capital in July 1864. President Lincoln stood atop the parapet to watch the fighting, but, with his tall figure and

top hat, he was clearly visible and came under fire from Confederate sharpshooters. Today, Fort Stevens Park is a reconstructed fort. To mimic how the area would have looked during the Civil War, the Civilian Conservation Corps cleared the park of its trees in 1936. It became an open field with cannons and a reconstructed parapet in the middle of Brightwood, DC in Ward 4.

Fort Marcy is in Fairfax County, Virginia off of the George Washington Memorial Parkway and south of the Potomac River. Fort Marcy was not built to protect the city itself but, instead, to control movement across Leesburg Turnpike and Chain Bridge.[1] The earthworks at the site are well-preserved amid a forest that grew in the years after the clear-cutting of the Civil War. There are picnic tables and cannons in the park, and it can be accessed by road or the Potomac Heritage Trail.

The District's Pre-Civil War (Tree) History

15,000 BCE-1000 CE **Early Human Presence**

The area around DC has likely been home to humans since 15,000 BCE.[2] In the beginning of their inhabitance of the DC area, humans lived as mobile hunter-gatherers. Around 2200 BCE North American native peoples started to create more permanent settlements. Around 1000 CE humans experimented with farming and began to cultivate maize.[3]

1000-1608 CE **Developed Native Agriculture**

Algonquian-speaking peoples, some of whose descendants now include the Piscataway Indian Nation, Piscataway Conoy Tribe, Pamunkey Indian Tribe, and others, lived in the region now known as DC. The largest settlement was in present-day Virginia, southeast of the convergence of the Potomac and Anacostia Rivers. John Smith referred to these people as the "Nacotchtanck," which comes from the Algonquian word "anaquashatanik" meaning "a town of traders," though they are also known as the Anacostans.[4] At the confluence of the two rivers, the Nacotchtank had access to a few trade routes and waterways rich with fish.

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[1] Garrison, Shannon. *Fort Marcy: Cultural Landscape Inventory, George Washington Memorial Parkway (Gwmp), National Park Service.* (National Capital Regional Office/CLI Database: NPS National Capital Regional Office, September 30, 2015), 3. https://irma.nps.gov/DataStore/Reference/Profile/2236793.
[2] Garrison, *Fort Marcy,* 25.
[3] Garrison, *Fort Marcy,* 25.
[4] Hedgpeth, Dana. "A Native American Tribe Once Called D.C. Home. It's Had No Living Members for Centuries." *The Washington Post*, November 22, 2018.

Their agricultural practices included techniques that involved felling trees and controlled burning of trees.[5] These tactics created more space for agriculture and allowed humans to live alongside and utilize forests without annihilating tree populations, retaining ecosystem function. The DC area was defined by forests of large white oak trees with an understory burned away and controlled by Native peoples.

1608-1775 **Colonial Washington, DC**

The DC area was both populated and wooded long before John Smith traveled down the Potomac River in 1608 or George Washington officially recognized DC as the capital in 1790. Native Americans made up much of the Mid-Atlantic population in the early 17th century. Their agricultural practices that girdled trees and burned small patches of forest avoided clearing large areas of forest like Europeans would begin to do in the area.[6] Europeans were attracted to the dense and tall forests of pine, oak, maple, and beech they found in the Mid-Atlantic.[7] English fur trader Henry Fleet described Nacotchtank as a major trading center and a "populous place" with "palisades about their towns made with great trees, and with scaffolds upon the walls."[8] It is not clear to what extent his views were representative of Europeans at the time, but Fleet's attention to "great trees" as building material could be interpreted as an attention to trees as a resource to be used up (for construction) and not a plant with any intrinsic value.

Within 200 years of Smith's voyage down the Potomac, Europeans and their descendants drastically altered the area's settlements and landscapes. They decimated both people and forests, transforming the DC area into plantations and farmland controlled by white Americans. Even the European introduction of their domesticated livestock (pigs) destroyed forest.[9] Land that once housed Native tribes became plantations, largely devoted to tobacco, reliant on the forced labor

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https://www.washingtonpost.com/history/2018/11/22/native-american-tribe-once-called-dc-home-its-had-no-living-members-centuries/.

[5] Crase, KL and Linebaugh, DW. *The Potomac River Gorge: A Site of Movement and Gathering Across Time: An Environmental History and Historic Resource Study*. Historic Resource Study. National Park Service (2020), 101.

[6] Crase and Linebaugh, *The Potomac River Gorge,* 101

[7] Colonial National Historical Park. "Trees and Shrubs." 2015, https://www.nps.gov/colo/learn/nature/treesandshrubs.htm.

[8] Crase, KL and Linebaugh, DW. *The Potomac River Gorge: A Site of Movement and Gathering Across Time: An Environmental History and Historic Resource Study*. Historic Resource Study. National Park Service (2020), 97.

[9] Crase, KL and Linebaugh, DW. *The Potomac River Gorge: A Site of Movement and Gathering Across Time: An Environmental History and Historic Resource Study*. Historic Resource Study. National Park Service (2020), 105.

of enslaved Black people.[10] Much of the southern portion of DC along the Potomac and the Anacostia was developed for agriculture.[11]

1775-1830 **The Revolutionary Era & Early Capital**

President George Washington might be deemed a sustainable leader in our modern context: he valued native trees and planted almost every type of tree native to the region on his property at Mount Vernon.[12] He was interested in utilizing live poplar trees as hedge fences—as a sustainable alternative to timber in order to avoid unnecessarily felling trees.[13] When he was just seventeen, he went on his first surveying expedition, and groves of trees that Washington perceived as having avoided significant human alteration fascinated him on his journey westward: “We went through most beautiful Groves of Sugar Trees & spent the best part of the Day in admiring the Trees & richness of the Land.”[14] Washington was interested in replicating the trees he found throughout the region at Mount Vernon, including eastern redbud and Virginia pine: he "Road to my Mill Swamp, where my Dogue run hands were at work & to other places in search of the sort of Trees I shall want for my walks, groves, & Wildernesses."[15]

But his wealth was reliant on enslaved agricultural labor, and that wealth is what allowed him to plant and keep so many trees in his “walks, groves, & Wildernesses.” While much of his property was devoted to productive agricultural lands, he also was able to preserve separate land as nature valuable simply for its beauty. His ability to preserve land was a luxury many people did not hold because they did not live with his excess of property or wealth. His use of the word “Wildernesses” illuminates how he thought of uncultivated land as “wild,” even though he *owned* the land and *chose* how to preserve it. He himself constructed the borders of that wilderness—partly for his own enjoyment walking and hunting within it and partly to utilize the forest’s resources of wood fuel, plant medicine, and caught food.[16]

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[10] Garrison, *Fort Marcy,* 26.
[11] Bedell, John and Wilkins, Andrew. *African American Experience Before Emancipation: Historic Context Narrative*. Historic Resource Study. National Park Service. Washington, DC; 2022.
[12] "What Would George Do?". George Washington Memorial Parkway (2017). https://www.nps.gov/gwmp/learn/what-would-george-do.htm.
[13] Washington, George, Donald Jackson, and Dorothy Twohig. *The Diaries of George Washington*. Vol 1. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia. PDF, 19. https://tile.loc.gov/storage-services/service/mss/mgw/mgwd/wd01/wd01.pdf.
[14] Washington, George. A Journal of My Journey over the Mountains. https://justjefferson.com/08GW.htm.
[15] "Eastern Redbud." *George Washington’s Mount Vernon*. https://www.mountvernon.org/the-estate-gardens/gardens-landscapes/plant-finder/item/eastern-redbud/.
[16] "Forest Trail." *George Washington’s Mount Vernon*. https://www.mountvernon.org/the-estate-gardens/location/forest-trail/.

Thomas Jefferson also greatly cared for the beauty of the landscape around him: he used a quarter of DC's city improvement budget to line Pennsylvania Avenue with poplars.[17] He lamented the felling of trees: "the unnecessary felling of a tree, perhaps the growth of centuries … pains me to an unspeakable degree."[18] About DC's transformation into a farmed and developed area, he said, "in the possession of absolute power, I might enforce the preservation of these valuable groves."[19] This quote demonstrates just how much Jefferson wanted to protect trees. On the other hand, his attention to citizens' rights to do what they want with their land indicates how much the early republic valued people's freedom to control their own private property. He could not enforce the preservation of trees because of an American pride and value in private property and security of that property—in contrast to British officers who could encroach on American land as they pleased and restrictive European property ownership immigrants attempted to escape in the United States.

If the Founders could have it their way, the nation's freedom might be reflected as greenery. They did not have it their way though. Enforcing their own views on the landscape around them would have been considered a kind of subjugation of people's rights to do what they wanted with their private property, though this fear of subjugation may have prevented them from creating a more sustainable and equitable world.

There lies a paradox in this early American concern over subjugating the rights of landowners while exerting absolute tyranny over the people who worked their land. Jefferson, as president, spoke hypothetically about having absolute power, but he ruled over the 609 enslaved people over which he claimed ownership with tangible absolute power. While Washington labored over which trees he thought would be best on his estate, he made enslaved people do his planting.

Meanwhile, within the District bordering George Washington's Mount Vernon, the capital's early growth focused on planning, beautification, and the official governmental business within its city center. The city had a controversial city planner—Pierre L'Enfant—and many problems securing funding for beautification projects. Rather than becoming a bustling capital, much of the District remained a rural area called Washington County. The city was changing, though. Washington County became farmland and the district's center slowly developed, meaning those

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[17] Commisso, Michael. *Pennsylvania Avenue National Historic Site (PA Ave, NW- White House to the Capitol): Cultural Landscape Inventory, National Mall and Memorial Parks, National Park Service*. Cultural Landscapes Inventory Report. 600217. NPS National Capital Region. National Capital Regional Office/CLI Database, 2015. https://irma.nps.gov/DataStore/Reference/Profile/2236795

[18] Jonnes, Jill. *Urban Forests: A Natural History of Trees and People in the American Cityscape*. New York: Penguin, 2017, xv.

[19] Choukas-Bradley, Melanie. *City of Trees: The Complete Field Guide to the Trees of Washington, D.C.* Third ed. Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2008. 3.

"great trees" and other natural resources once drawing Europeans to the area were beginning to be destroyed amidst the city's role as a center of trade.

1830-1861 **Antebellum DC**

The young capital continued to grow, leading to development especially in the center of the District. In the 1850s, Congress determined the "national capital must be made more presentable—for the public convenience, and the self-respect of the republic." They paved streets, improved the Mall, and planted new trees every year.[20] Thus, trees were a critical part of the city's landscape and sometimes valued purely for their appearance—as a way to make the capital more presentable.

The higher ground encircling the city either existed within the rural Washington County or Alexandria County, Virginia. This rural high ground is where the Civil War Defenses of Washington would eventually be built.

In Fairfax County, Virginia, the land that became **Fort Marcy** was owned by Gilbert Vanderwerken, a white man and omnibus company owner originally from Waterford, New York.[21] On his property, he had grazing land for thoroughbred horses (that moved his omnibuses) and farm fields of wheat, hay and corn, and, according to census records, he likely did not enslave any people.[22] The landscape was probably a mixture of farmland and forest.

Looking North, in a part of the District where development and roads began to spread, free Black people established a community called Vinegar Hill near where **Fort Stevens** would stand. The community included a free Black woman named Elizabeth Proctor Thomas, who would later become crucial in the re-telling of the Battle of Fort Stevens. The United States Army took her land (which included a house, stable with a barn, cow shed and other outbuildings) and tore down her buildings to create the fort.[23] The Emory Methodist Church bordered her property and would also become a part of the fort land.

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[20] CEHP, Incorporated. *The Land and the Owners.* National Park Service National Capital Region (Chevy Chase, MD: 2005). http://npshistory.com/publications/cwdw/hrs/chap3-1.htm.
[21] Garrison, *Fort Marcy,* 27.
[22] Garrison, *Fort Marcy,* 27.
[23] NPS National Capital Regional Office and McMillen, Frances. 2010. *Fort Stevens: Cultural Landscape Inventory, Rock Creek Park - Fort Circle Park - North, National Park Service*. Cultural Landscapes Inventory Report. 600147. (National Capital Regional Office/CLI Database, 2010), 38. https://irma.nps.gov/DataStore/Reference/Profile/2184742

The area east of the Anacostia was largely made up of plantations with enslaved people forced to farm tobacco.[24] **Fort Dupont** was on farmland owned by Michael Caton, who lived in Ward 4 in the northwestern part of the city.[25] While there were a large number of plantations near Fort Dupont, much of the nearby area was forested before the Civil War, as development had not yet spread significantly outward into southeast DC.

1861-1865 **The Civil War**

The paradoxes of liberty for all and systematic enslavement constructed by the Founders came into bloody conflict during the Civil War—with constitutional crises on the morality and legality of slavery and succession.

Washington, DC became the heart of these crises, home to the United States government and on the border with Virginia, a Confederate state. Protecting the city became crucial, and the Civil War Defenses of Washington encircling the city became the solution. DC transformed into a heavily fortified city by 1862.

In order to preserve the United States, trees needed to come down. The forts needed to be cleared of trees in order to provide line of sight for the U.S. Army line and to acquire lumber for the construction of the forts. American freedom once again meant sacrificing greenery for the preservation of American rights. Forts Marcy, Dupont, and Stevens all saw felling of trees for a mile or two surrounding them. Between 2,000 and 3,000 men worked in the fall of 1862 to clear trees around the capital.[26] Soldiers took note of the forests' destruction as a great loss to their landscape but a necessity of war: "It was a sad necessity that thus compelled the spoiling of nature's fairest handiwork and stripped the beautiful hills of their green robes,--but so it must be."[27]

Fort Stevens saw battle. During fighting, the remaining nearby trees were almost detrimental to the U.S. effort. These trees provided shelter to Confederate sharpshooters, and one tree is rumored to have actually allowed a sharpshooter to fire toward the leader of the U.S., President Abraham Lincoln. Thirty-seven years after the battle, a Federal soldier recounted the story of the Confederate sharpshooters: "The rebel sharpshooters concealed in trees near Fort Stevens killed a number of our soldiers. One of the sharpshooters was killed by a citizen who came from Fort

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[24] Lester, Molly. *Fort Dupont: Cultural Landscape Inventory, National Capital Parks East- Fort Circle Park- East, National Park Service*. Cultural Landscapes Inventory Report. 600079. NPS National Capital Region. (National Capital Regional Office/CLI Database, 2013), 22. https://irma.nps.gov/DataStore/Reference/Profile/2236799

[25] Lester, *Fort Dupont*, 22.

[26] NPS National Capital Regional Office, *Fort Stevens*, 24.

[27] NPS National Capital Regional Office, *Fort Stevens*, 24.

Stevens with a rifle and fired at him. He fell headlong from the tree dead, with a bullet through his head."[28] The tree's presence gives the scene an expectation of beauty, but, in the context of war, the tree represents danger to the U.S. and the man's graphic demise. In 1904 *The Washington Times* published a description of the battle of Fort Stevens in which trees appear as a dangerous obstacle adding to the atmosphere of heroism as soldiers defended the capital in front of their commander-in-chief: "We can almost hear the booming of the cannons and the crack of the sharpshooters' rifles from the trees around us."[29]

To local residents, though, the nearby trees were not a sign of danger but an intrinsically valuable part of their landscape lost after centuries of growth. A group of parishioners at Emory Methodist Church (the church bordering the fort torn down to become a weapons magazine—along with all its trees) wrote to President Johnson after the war: "It is hardly just to estimate the grove of primeval trees which surrounded the church and shielded it and its congregation from the winds of winter and from the summer suns, by its value as timber for building defenses…trees were the growth of centuries and another century may pass before another growth of equal beauty and utility will crown the eminence on which it stood. The present generation of worshippers can never live to enjoy such shades again."[30]

Fort Marcy saw soldiers concerned with the destruction of the forest around them. A soldier described the hillside cleared of trees at Fort Marcy in September 1861: "I remember to have watched from our encampment, the disappearance of these forests, and as giant after giant was seen to fall along the edge of the woods, the forest seemed to melt away and disappear as snow gradually dissolves from the hillsides in the springtime."[31] The soldier described the forest's disappearance as both natural and disturbing: the forest changes like snow during the passing of seasons, but giants are lost forever. His writing reflects a belief that humans must alter land in order to survive, but the changes they make are irreversible and profound.

During the construction of Fort Marcy, another soldier described the process of the felling of trees: "It was an interesting sight to witness the simultaneous felling of a whole hillside of timber; the choppers would begin at the foot of the hill, the line extending for perhaps a mile, and cut only part way through the tree, and in this way work up to the crest, leaving the top row so that a single blow would bring down the tree—then, when all was ready, the bugle would sound

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[28] Shaw, Daniel W. "Incidents of the Battle of Fort Stevens." *The National Tribune* (Washington, DC), August 22, 1901, 3. https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn82016187/1901-08-22/ed-1/seq-3/. Library of Congress.
[29] Lambert, Wilton J. "In Remembrance of Fort Stevens." *The Washington Times* (Washington, DC), May 30, 1904, 4. https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84026749/1904-05-30/ed-1/seq-4/. Library of Congress.
[30] NPS National Capital Regional Office, *Fort Stevens*, 25.
[31] Crase and Linebaugh, *The Potomac River Gorge,* 240.

as a signal, and the last stroke of the axe be given, which brought down the top row; these falling on those below would bring them down, and like the billow on the surface of the ocean, the forest would fall with a crash like mighty thunder."[32]

Fort Dupont saw a surrounding forest that left it vulnerable to attack. Like at all the circle forts, most trees and shrubs were cleared for a mile or two from the perimeter of Fort Dupont in order to prevent enemy troops from hiding in trees.[33] But, when first hastily constructing the Eastern Ridge forts in 1861, the U.S. Army had left densely forested areas between some forts on the Eastern Ridge, including Fort Dupont and Fort Davis.[34] The forest left the Eastern Ridge vulnerable to attack, but, because of a lack of personnel and resources, it took the army years to fell the trees and act on their strategic concerns about the area's ability to withstand attack. In 1865, the year after the attack on Fort Stevens, the army did more work to clear brush from the Eastern Branch.[35] The work may have never been completed, however, and, over the course of the four-year-long war, forts along the Eastern Ridge fell into deteriorated conditions and brush had grown close to the forts.[36] The eastern area of DC was one of the only areas on the perimeter of DC that maintained some degree of forestation during the Civil War.

Still, the fort relied on nearby felled trees to be constructed. The heavy timber used to construct the fort and the abatis surrounding it came from an estate near Fort Davis.[37] Living trees were not only dangerous enemy-enabling objects but deemed more useful dead for construction.

1865-1932 **Developing the Modern, Postbellum City**

After the war, most of the Civil War Defenses of Washington were dismantled. The lumber from the forts was sold off.[38] Much of the forts' land went back into private ownership. In some cases, forest grew in the place of the fort that once stood. Sometimes urban development sprang up. Many forts became homes for freed people after the war. Often land had become harder to farm again after soldiers' occupation. The city had been transformed during the war, and transformation continued after the war. DC Governor Alexander "Boss" Shepherd instituted

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[32] Crase and Linebaugh, *The Potomac River Gorge,* 240.
[33] Lester, *Fort Dupont*, 35.
[34] Lester, *Fort Dupont*, 31.
[35] CEHP, Incorporated. *Maintenance of the Defenses.* National Park Service National Capital Region (Chevy Chase, MD: 2005). http://npshistory.com/publications/cwdw/hrs/chap6-1.htm.
[36] Lester, *Fort Dupont*, 36.
[37] Lester, *Fort Dupont*, 35.
[38] Alexander, B.S. "Large Government Sale of Timber, Lumber, and Abattis in the Dismantled Forts around Washington City." *The Alexandria Gazette* (Alexandria, VA), September 27, 1865. https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85025007/1865-09-27/ed-1/seq-2/. Library of Congress.

major improvements to make the District into a modern city (though he also incurred a large debt and, thus, DC home rule ended).[39]

And, as the city went back into private ownership, the city's status as a forested landscape seemed distant to its inhabitants. In a 1912 Columbia Historical Society report aiming to document the Potomac River's history, forest and trees are associated with Native Americans explaining them as "the red men of the forest" and described as a people long gone and "grave but unfortunate."[40] Not only does the document dehumanize Native peoples but it classifies the wild forests as long-gone. In a document focused on the beauty of the Potomac, forests and trees are mentioned as outdated and uncivilized.

A description in *A Guide to the City of Washington, What to See, and How to See It*, described the conditions of the forts in 1869: "About two miles outside of Washington, and completely encircling the city, is a chain of fortifications, completely connected by a military-road, forming a boulevard, which, by the aid of trees and shrubbery, judiciously cared for, would be equal to the famed drives surrounding the city of Paris. All of the fortifications on the north and east sides have long since been dismantled and are now either grass-grown or leveled with the surrounding earth, and completely obliterated by the farmer's ploughshare."[41] Only four years after the war, the fort structures had already been destroyed, though the views left by the clearing of trees remained.

A guide from 1892 further described the forts' beautiful views, even as the forts were in disarray: "the views from the forts are usually the finest which can be found. From many of them, the city, with its glistening white Capitol and Monument, can be seen on one side, and on the other a magnificent stretch of country with hills and streams, farms and forests, stretched out as far as [the] eye can reach."[42] The destruction of forests during the war would change DC's views forever.

Serious efforts to preserve forts began in the 1890s. **Fort Stevens** maintained significance as the site of DC's Civil War battle and the only time a standing president came under fire during wartime. Reunions continued for years after the war, and newspapers focused on remembering the details of the battle.

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[39] Lester, *Fort Dupont*, 44.
[40] Rogers, William Edgar. "The Historic Potomac River." *Records of the Columbia Historical Society, Washington, D.C.*, vol. 16, 1913, pp. 25–63. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/40066884. Accessed 28 June 2023.
[41] Lester, *Fort Dupont*, 45.
[42] Lester, *Fort Dupont*, 46.

The earthworks greatly eroded partly because people came back to the site to search for artifacts. The western part of the fort was largely preserved, while other parts of the fort began to be consumed by houses.[43] Groups interested in preserving the fort struggled for decades to receive congressional support before the National Capital Park and Planning Commission acquired the land (from property owners including Elizabeth Proctor Thomas' family) to build the fort park in the late 1920s and early 1930s.[44]

Fort Stevens Parapet in 1900. NPS / RON HARVEY, JR.

In the years after the Civil War, various trees gained fame near Fort Stevens. On the grounds of the Walter Reed Army Medical Center stood a tulip poplar tree famous as the "Sharpshooter Tree." The tree came down in the late 1910s. Before it was taken down, the tree stood on the hospital grounds dead with cropped limbs for many years. It was quite large and labeled with a sign that read: "Used as a signal station by Confederate soldiers under Gen. Early during the attack on Washington, July 11 and 12, 1864. Also occupied by sharpshooters."[45] Because the tree was so tall, Confederate soldiers could climb up into its limbs and shoot toward Fort Stevens, even though its roots grew from lower ground than the fort.

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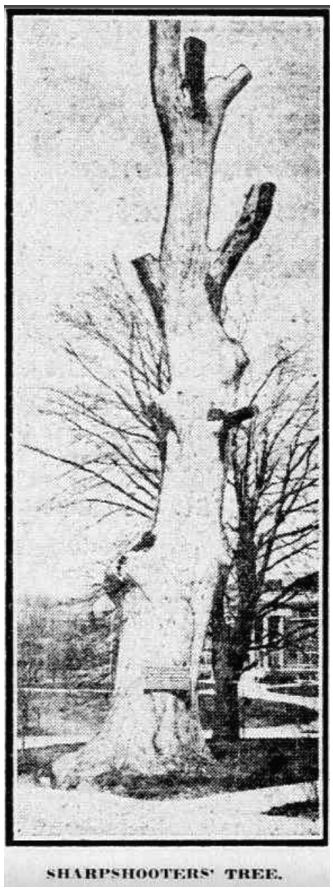
[43] NPS National Capital Regional Office, *Fort Stevens*, 50.
[44] NPS National Capital Regional Office, *Fort Stevens*, 56.
[45] Shannon, J.H. "Sharpshooters' Tree." *The Sunday Star* (Washington, DC), April 26, 1914, 9. https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83045462/1914-04-26/ed-1/seq-60/. Library of Congress.

Local newspapers periodically reported on the tree as a place to visit: “The great branches have been sawed off—amputated might be a better word, bearing in mind the place where the tree stands—so that only the trunk and the butts of the big limbs that formed the crown remain. The tree was long ago stripped of bark, and its wood is weathered to an ashen gray. It was a yellow poplar, but it's dead.”[46] That Evening Star article from April 1914 also speculated on the cause of the tree’s death, claiming there were stories that it had been killed by a lightning strike or the excavations and filling made to construct Walter Reed Hospital.



SHARPSHOOTERS' TREE.

EVENING STAR, 1914 / LIB. OF CONGRESS

Confederate sharpshooter's tree, which once stood in the Walter Reed Hospital grounds.

EVENING STAR, 1934 / LIB. OF CONGRESS

The attention to the tree after the war demonstrates the idea that trees can witness human history. Trees can hold value purely because of their presence during significant historical events. The tree became a kind of memorial to the Battle of Fort Stevens by living through the battle and

[46] Shannon, "Sharpshooters’ Tree."

being utilized by enemy forces. The Sharpshooter Tree was also a reminder of how trees posed danger to U.S. forces during the Civil War.

Likewise, a walnut tree (or possibly a locust tree) gained fame from growing in the spot where Lincoln once stood watching the battle from the parapet and narrowly avoided being shot by sharpshooters. Soldiers present at the battle told the story of Lincoln's near-death experience for many years, but the best sources were General Horatio Wright and Elizabeth Proctor Thomas. The walnut tree was likely removed in the reconstruction of the fort, since it was not present at the time of the battle and was replaced by a stone marker designating Lincoln's presence at the site.

Images from The Washington Times in July 1911 illustrating Lincoln's role in the battle and the parapet tree memorialized by both General Wright and Elizabeth Proctor Thomas. THE WASHINGTON TIMES, 1911 / LIBRARY OF CONGRESS.

In 1909, a nearby black locust tree was used in the creation of a gavel presented to Commander Nevius, a man who lost his right arm in the battle. The locust tree became worthy of its commemorative qualities simply because it grew on the parapet where Lincoln had stood.

In a city that began a long march of development after the Civil War, trees became reminders of and witnesses to history. However, each of these trees no longer stands. The Sharpshooter Tree was lost to natural causes or development. Lincoln's memorial walnut was lost to efforts to reconstruct a landscape and battle long gone. The locust became a gavel, a souvenir of war. Trees can be well-loved and admired memorials, but, one day, they will fall.

At **Fort Marcy**, the Vanderweken family retained ownership and protected the earthworks from outside infringement. The fort area became forested. In an article describing local Civil War defenses from the *Evening Star* in 1912, the parapets of Fort Marcy were "growing with pines and blooming with wild flowers."[47] The view from the Vanderweken property was beautiful, and "the whole country appears to be forest grown" with the cleared fields below mostly hidden by woods.[48] Not only had the fort become full of vegetation it lacked during the war (because soldiers felled trees and trampled shrubs), but its view had not been overtaken by development like in the more urban DC.

Fort Dupont became forested as well. Immediately after the war, many freed people stayed at Fort Dupont before moving to more permanent communities.[49] After their relocation, the fort's earthworks were protected and preserved by community members and historians.[50] Development was slower east of the Anacostia River, so Fort Dupont was not as threatened by desires for housing as Fort Stevens was.

In 1918, the District Tree Nursery was converted into a hospital to combat the Spanish Flu pandemic, and Fort Dupont, with its undeveloped land, became home to the new District Tree Nursery.[51] A 1930 *Washington Times* article describes the Fort Dupont tree nursery as furthering

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[47] "Civil War Defenses near the Chain Bridge." *Evening Star* (Washington, DC), September 22, 1912, 4, 3. https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83045462/1912-09-22/ed-1/seq-51/. Library of Congress.
[48] "Civil War Defenses near the Chain Bridge."
[49] Lester, *Fort Dupont*, 44.
[50] Lester, *Fort Dupont*, 44.
[51] Lester, *Fort Dupont*, 77.

"capital tree culture."[52] For three decades, trees were propagated at Fort Dupont to become street trees. Having been cleared of trees fifty years prior, the fairly open land was perfect for growing new ones to help in beautifying the capital.

By 1929, the National Capital Park and Planning Commision had acquired the land to make Fort Dupont into a park.

William Lines, foreman at Fort Dupont, and Clifford Lanham, superintendent of trees for the District, working in the tree nursery. THE WASHINGTON TIMES, 1930 / LIBRARY OF CONGRESS.

1932-1945 **The New Deal of DC Parks**

In 1933, land acquired to preserve **Fort Stevens** as a park was transferred to the National Park Service.[53] Photos from 1934 show many trees along the border of the Emory Methodist Church, beside the parapet remains, and on the northern section of the parkland.[54] A March 1935 NPS topographic map recorded the trees present at the fort, which included mulberry, pear, locust, and wild cherry trees that ranged in size from six to eight feet tall.[55]

In 1936, the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) began work recreating Fort Stevens.[56] There was a 1935 NPS plan for many large trees throughout the park, but the planting plan was never

[52] "District Nursery Furthers Capital Tree Culture." *The Washington Times* (Washington, DC), April 1, 1930, 19. https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84026749/1930-04-01/ed-1/seq-19/. Library of Congress.
[53] NPS National Capital Regional Office, *Fort Stevens*, 57.
[54] NPS National Capital Regional Office, *Fort Stevens*, 55.
[55] NPS National Capital Regional Office, *Fort Stevens*, 56.
[56] NPS National Capital Regional Office, *Fort Stevens*, 58.

implemented.[57] The NPS planned to clear all dead trees from the parkland within a few years, but the CCC cleared the fort of almost all trees present. The CCC recreated the largely treeless landscape at the time of the Civil War, rather than a landscape that would favor shade and visitor comfort.[58] The CCC reconstructed seven embrasures and gun platforms and the magazine and ditch that surrounded the parapet.[59] In reconstructing these parts of the fort, the CCC substituted concrete for wood in the interest of longevity.

[57] NPS National Capital Regional Office, *Fort Stevens*, 58.
[58] NPS National Capital Regional Office, *Fort Stevens*, 66.
[59] NPS National Capital Regional Office, *Fort Stevens*, 58.

District, Camp Comes to Front

206 Young Workers Making Beauty Spot of Fort Dupont, in Southeast Section.

Summer or Winter, in any kind of weather, C. C. C. workers pursue their labors in camps within the city limits of Washington. At the top youths are shown acquiring brawn and brown while clearing land for a pleasure park at Fort Dupont, Southeast Washington. At the lower left lads are shown at work in Midwinter at a nearby camp. At the right, felling trees on the Fort Dupont project. —Photos by National Park Service.

EVENING STAR, 1935 / LIBRARY OF CONGRESS.

While the CCC's most extensive fort circle work was at Fort Stevens, the CCC's camp at **Fort Dupont** was often reported in newspapers and quickly created a park with a wide range of activities. The CCC was in the park from 1932 to 1942, and, in that time, workers built sixty picnic tables and stone hearths, graded Fort Drive, formed the landscape of the Fort Dupont Park Golf Course, planted rhododendrons, ivy, and mountain laurels, and built a dam within part of

the stream.[60] NPS guidelines instructed CCC workers to create a park that would "blend unobtrusively into the natural setting," meaning they worked to preserve the landscape within which they worked and replanted native species.[61] The park was considered "wilderness" during its development and in 1937 when it opened.[62] The park included nearly 400 acres of woods, mostly left the way they had grown since the Civil War.

NEW BEAUTY SPOT FOR LOVERS OF OUTDOORS

CCC's Magic Hand at Fort Dupont

UNRIVALLED beauty will be the boast of old Fort Dupont Park in the Southeast, at the District line, when work of the CCC is finished next spring. Groves of stately trees, clear streams, and landscaped walks will delight lovers of the outdoor life. Picnic grounds will further enhance the charms of the location. International News Photo.

THE WASHINGTON TIMES, 1935 / LIBRARY OF CONGRESS.

In 1938 the *Washington Daily News* called Fort Dupont a "pint-sized version of Rock Creek Park" and imagined the park as a "picnic heaven."[63] Fort Dupont Park became revered as a beautiful urban getaway. In a November 1940 advertisement in the *Evening Star* for a new housing development, Fort Dupont's trees were crucial to the housing's appeal: "Trees,

[60] Lester, *Fort Dupont*, 12.
[61] Lester, *Fort Dupont*, 12.
[62] Lester, *Fort Dupont*, 14.
[63] Lester, *Fort Dupont*, 120.

throughout the development have been spared, and just over the ridge is Fort Dupont Park, as lovely as Rock Creek Park, with play and picnic areas and woodland walks easily accessible."[64]

In addition, 1935 protests about movement of trees from the park shows just how important the park's woods were. The Office of National Capital Parks had ordered the transplant of a group of full-grown holly trees from Fort Dupont to Rock Creek Park, where the Park Service said the trees would be better protected and more widely viewed.[65] After protests in Southeast DC, the Southeast Council of Citizens' Associations advised the trees' move to Anacostia Park, and the Park Service listened.[66] The local community valued the holly trees' presence for the inherent beauty the trees provided to their community park.

1945-1968 **A New Fort Circle Park**

While the CCC worked to create a new park atmosphere at both **Fort Dupont** and **Fort Stevens, Fort Marcy** remained under Vanderweken family ownership, who left the earthen remains fairly untouched.[67] For nearly a century, the site was untended. Nearby hillsides became covered in trees, and, by 1959 when NCPC bought the land, the landscape had returned to a densely forested habitat similar to the one on the site before the war.[68] The fort was covered with trees and shrubs associated with a successional mixed deciduous forest.[69] There were various species of oak, basswood, white ash, tulip poplar, yellow buckeye, black maple, sugar maple, southern sugar maple, American beech, bitternut hickory, and black walnut, similar to what species may have been present before the war.[70]

In 1953, the Vanderwekens sold the land, and the fort's remains were almost lost. The state of Virginia reportedly did not want to buy or protect the fort's land because Virginia had fought against this U.S. Army fort in the war a century before. Local activists argued for the preservation of the land as a public park. A letter to the *Evening Star* in 1958 explains how even

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[64] "Goodwill Industries and A.D.A. Merge Talents in Home." *The Evening Star* (Washington, DC), November 30, 1940, Real Estate, B-5. https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83045462/1940-11-30/ed-1/seq-23/. Library of Congress.
[65] "Anacostia Park Gets Holly Trees." *The Evening Star* (Washington, DC), March 20, 1935, B-9. https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83045462/1935-03-20/ed-1/seq-27/. Library of Congress.
[66] "Anacostia Park Gets Holly Trees."
[67] Garrison, *Fort Marcy,* 4.
[68] Garrison, *Fort Marcy,* 60.
[69] Garrison, *Fort Marcy,* 60.
[70] Garrison, *Fort Marcy,* 60.

the Society of the Lees of Virginia, proud Southerners, wanted to protect the fort: "a bulldozer can destroy in a day what it took hundreds of men nearly a century ago, a year to create."[71]

A housewife from Alexandria (and the future chairwoman of the Northern Virginia Regional Planning and Economic Development Commission), R.F.S. Starr planted her car in front of bulldozers in 1957.[72] She stopped workers from destroying the earthworks, and, in 1959, the federal government was able to incorporate Fort Marcy into George Washington Memorial Parkway, preserving the fort as a public park.

Fort Marcy Park opened in 1963. The park included a Civil War-era cannon and a clearing for picnicking. Thanks to both the Vanderwekens and Starr, the earthworks were in excellent condition. The mature forest insulated the new fort park from heavy traffic on the GWMP.[73] Thus, the fort was both easily accessible by car and separated from busy modern life by its trees. Fort Marcy became a forested oasis with a reminder of history visible in its earthworks.

1968-2000 **Modern Park Usage**

As Fort Marcy struggled for protection, **Fort Stevens** and **Fort Dupont** progressed with the city around them. Fort Stevens continued to hold anniversary celebrations of the battle every July. But, while Fort Stevens focused on the site's history, Fort Dupont made its own history as a park. In 1972, the Fort Dupont Summer Event Series began. Every summer, DC community members gather in Fort Dupont for a variety of summer recreational activities, the most popular of which is a summer concert series. Since their inception, the summer concerts have been free, and they draw viewers from both the local neighborhood and across the region to hear and watch jazz, blues, modern dance, disco, go-go, gospel music, and more.[74] In the 1980s, the size of an average crowd ranged from 20,000 to 25,000 viewers every weekend.[75]

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[71] Templeman, Eleanor Lee. "Let Fort Marcy Fall?" *The Evening Star* (Washington, DC), April 7, 1958, Letters to the Star, A-10. https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83045462/1958-04-07/ed-1/seq-10/. Library of Congress.
[72] "Housewife's Defiance Saved Fort Marcy." *The Evening Star* (Washington, DC), July 29, 1963, B-4. https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83045462/1963-07-29/ed-1/seq-24/. Library of Congress.
[73] Garrison, *Fort Marcy,* 4.
[74] Lester, *Fort Dupont*, 146.
[75] Lester, *Fort Dupont*, 146.

A Fort Dupont summer concert in 2008. NPS PHOTO / TERRY ADAMS.

By 1974, Fort Dupont had community garden plots and a hiker-biker trail connecting the southeastern section of the city. Additionally, the golf course originally constructed by the CCC had become an amphitheater. This amphitheater is where the summer concerts took place. In 1980, *The Washington Post* described the concerts as being in "a hole in the woods," and the Washington AfroAmerican called it an "environmentally pleasing wooded setting."[76] The concerts' position in the woods separates the music and the concertgoers from whatever may happen in the city around them.

The shade is also greatly appreciated when Fort Dupont is used for picnics and family reunions.[77] Even in DC's hot summers, the park's shade allows for outdoor family gathering without great discomfort.

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[76] Williams, Brett and Ramos, Tanya. 1997. *Rapid ethnographic assessment of Civil War Defenses of Washington and Anacostia Park management plans*. US National Park Service. Washington, DC, 122. https://irma.nps.gov/DataStore/Reference/Profile/165764

[77] Williams and Ramos, *Rapid ethnographic assessment,* 131.

The park's greenery has become more important than its well-preserved earthworks. According to a 1997 ethnographic study, the Civil War is not the important aspect of the park for users; rather, the visitor's particular form of recreation is more relevant to them.[78]

2000-Today **Pockets of Green in the Modern Capital**

Today, George Washington and Thomas Jefferson might gawk at the way the city has developed. But their attention to native trees and preservation of a strong union live on in the Civil War Defenses of Washington. Fort Stevens protects the history of the capital as crucial in a united nation. Fort Dupont provides everyday recreational opportunities amid native woodland. Fort Marcy represents their young nation's ability to withstand conflict and come back growing green.

Fort Stevens Park sits in a well-developed Brightwood, off of 13th St NW and the commemorative Elizabeth P. Thomas Way. The space is clearly designed to mimic a different time, though the fort's replica sits in a different lot than it once did. A nearby apartment building covers the foundation of the old fort. A tree sits in each corner of the fort, but these trees were planned; they neither lived through the Civil War nor did they spring up on their own after the war's end. This whole park has been planned by historians, local community members, and government officials, and it was constructed over years by the CCC. The revetments, designed to look like the wooden ones that once supported the fort's parapets during the war, are made of concrete, rather than wood. The fort is a relic of a past that really only remains in the park's earth.

Although planned, reconstructed 70 years after the war, and surrounded by a developing modern city, the park still reminds visitors of the Civil War and a battle crucial to preserving the United States we have today. The open lawn dotted with cannons and earthworks amidst the city around it designates the space as one separate from our modern era, though the fort *does* physically exist within the modern capital. Unlike at Fort Dupont and Fort Marcy, Fort Stevens is not swallowed by the woods around it: the trees at the fort's corners welcome visitors into the greenery and provide shade, but the fort clearly sits next to a developing city. Visitors can view the buildings around the fort as soldiers once viewed open fields cleared of trees.

Fort Dupont provides southeast DC with hundreds of acres of mature native trees and woodlands. The earthworks are well-maintained and mostly free of trees and shrubs, protecting

[78] Williams and Ramos, *Rapid ethnographic assessment,* 137.

the fort's remains from erosion and separating the war history from the park's modern uses around it.

Well-trafficked roads, Fort Dupont Drive and Fort Davis Drive, travel through the park, and, for a moment, motorists have left the city behind and can enjoy a moment in the green shade. Fort Dupont Drive travels past an activity center for all ages and the stage where the summer concerts bring the park alive in August. A community garden sits beside the road as well, and long-time gardeners continue the plots they have had for years while new gardeners begin to learn the ropes.

In 2012 *The Washington Post* reported on 40 years of free concerts at Fort Dupont Park. A man named Carlos Evans had been to 38: "The trees you see down there used to be about this tall," he says, tapping the brim of his periwinkle ballcap."[79] Fort Dupont has grown with its users, as its history remains protected within its trees.

Fort Marcy is a U.S. Army fort in a Confederate state, though it is still preserved—representing how the nation has prevailed to this day. The Founders' vision of a successful independent nation in 1776 remains in Fort Marcy's earthworks surrounded by Virginia forest.

As a visitor travels down the access road from George Washington Memorial Parkway toward the fort, they leave a hectic modern city behind and, instead, enter a wooded oasis. Bird sounds increase, and the air grows cooler with the shade from the forest around. Even beside a city and a highway, a forest grows on its own, engulfing trails and creating stretches of land with no view free of trees.

The earthworks have become small vegetated hills beside picnic tables and cannons brought to make the park more enjoyable and visibly historic. The earthworks blend into the park around them, though sloping paths through the woods mimic soldiers' expeditions, as they watched "giant after giant" fall from the woods. Today, new giants begin to grow.

[79] Richards, Chris. "Fort Dupont Park: D.C.'S Haven for Music in the Summertime." *The Washington Post* (Washington, DC), July 26, 2012. https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/fort-dupont-park-dcs-haven-for-music-in-the-summertime/2012/07/26/gJQAbcQIBX_story.html.

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