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Fort Washington

Maryland

This fort is an outstanding example of an early 19th-century coastal defense. It was designed to withstand attack by wooden naval vessels armed with smoothbore artillery. Its high masonry walls, gun positions, dry moat, and drawbridge illustrate some of the principles of military science and architecture used during our Nation's early life. Fort Washington also occupies the site of the earliest fortification erected for the defense of the National Capital. It was begun in 1814 for the immediate replacement of the first fort, which was destroyed on August 27, 1814, when the United States was at war with England.

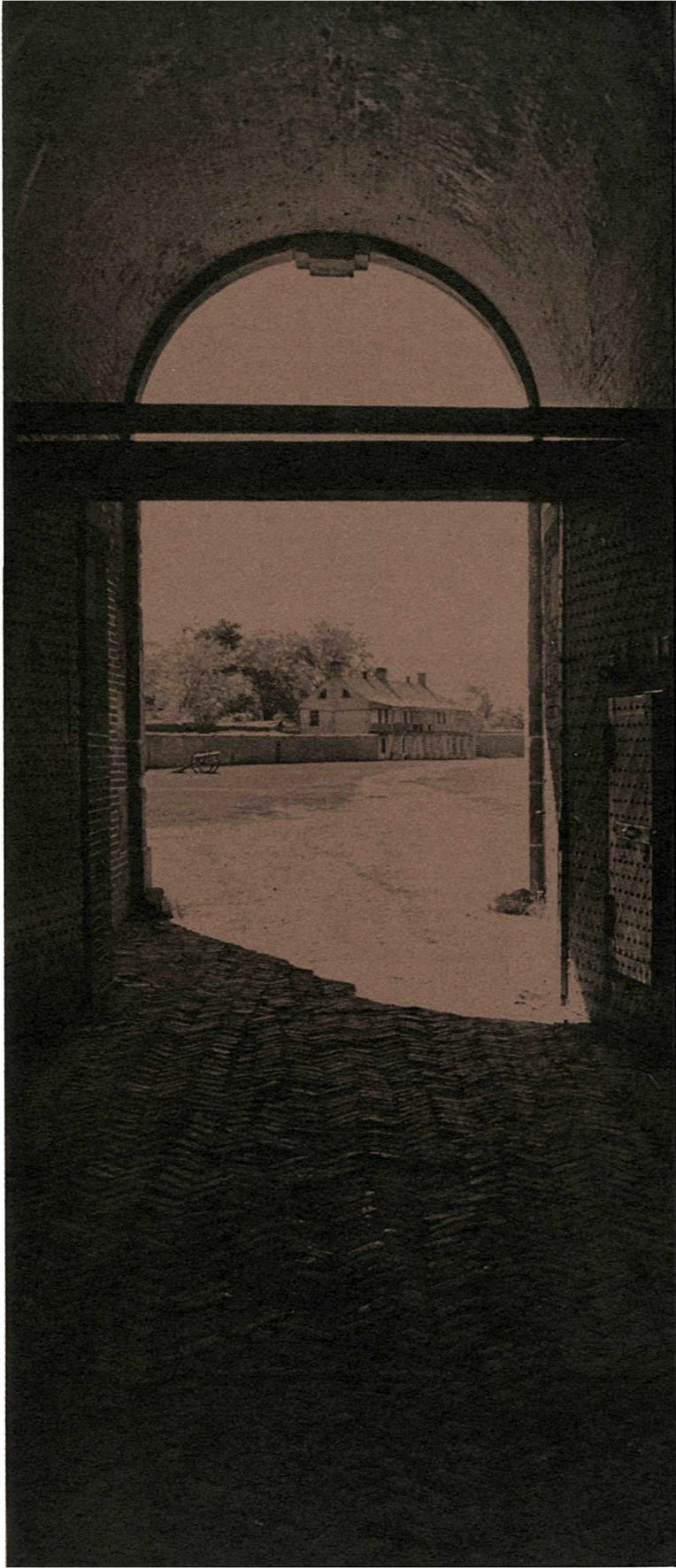
Early Defense of the Capital Against Attack by Water

More than a decade passed after the laying of the cornerstones for the President's House in 1792 and the Capitol in 1793 before steps were taken for the defense of the new seat of government in the District of Columbia. Reluctance on the part of Congress to support a defense program was not dispelled until Europe's Napoleonic Wars came dangerously near the American shores. In 1808, after repeated seizure of American seamen and the detention and search of the U.S. Frigate *Chesapeake* by a British naval vessel, the Government appropriated funds for the defense of the ports and harbors of the United States. Measures were promptly launched for the protection of the new Capital City. Land on the Maryland shore of the Potomac opposite Mount Vernon was acquired from the Digges family of Warburton as a site for a fort. This location had been selected earlier by George Washington, in 1794, when the construction of a fort on the Potomac was under consideration.

Work on the first Fort Washington, or Fort Warburton as it was then called, was soon begun, and by December 1, 1809, was reported completed, except for placing the earthen retaining walls on the rampart. It was described as an "inclosed work of Masonry" having a semi-elliptical face with circular flanks enclosed by a perpendicular wall suitable for defense by small arms. The height of the rampart wall was generally 14 feet above the bottom of the ditch. The main fort was commanded by a "Tower of Masonry calculated to contain one company" and six cannon.

Destruction of the First Fort

Fort Warburton stood only 5 years. It was destroyed in August 1814 when the British successfully attacked the new Capital. The British offensive began on August 19 when their troops landed at Benedict, on the Patuxent River, and marched toward the Capital, bypassing Fort Washington. On August 24, 1814, the British defeated the Americans in the Battle of Bladensburg, and captured Washington. There, they burned the Capitol, the White House, and most of the other public buildings. British



war vessels, moving up the Potomac to cooperate with their land forces, reached Fort Washington on August 27. Capt. S. T. Dyson, who commanded the position, destroyed the fort rather than have it fall into enemy hands. The British fleet then sailed up the Potomac to Alexandria. It remained there until August 31 loading tobacco, flour, and other produce before sailing back to Chesapeake Bay.

L'Enfant and the Present Fort

On September 8, 1814, only 12 days after the destruction of the first Fort Washington, Acting Secretary of War James Monroe requested the French engineer, Maj. Pierre L'Enfant, who had designed the National Capital in 1791, to reconstruct the destroyed fortification. During the days that followed, it was expected that the British might again move up the Potomac. L'Enfant superintended clearing away the debris and demolition of the old fort, and then began work on a new water battery and wharf. Materials ordered for the fort included 200,000 bricks and a large quantity of stone and lumber, indicating the considerable size of the work.

Anxiety for the safety of the Capital relaxed after October 14, 1814, when the British ships in Chesapeake Bay sailed for Jamaica. The Capital felt even more secure after the Treaty of Ghent was received in Washington on February 13, 1815. The free hand apparently given to L'Enfant during the emergency of the previous autumn was now checked by Acting Secretary of War James Monroe. In November, the advisability of his removing some of the old fort was questioned, and the subject of economy came to the fore. L'Enfant was requested to submit reports on the work in progress, and to prepare detailed plans of the new fort for submission to the War Department. The temperamental French engineer was greatly offended by these criticisms and requests. Upon the continued refusal of L'Enfant to comply with the requests of the War Department, work on Fort Washington was suspended on July 8, 1815. On September 6, L'Enfant was dismissed and Lt. Col. Walker K. Armistead took over the work.

Construction of the New Fort, 1815-24

A month after Colonel Armistead was assigned to superintend the construction of Fort Washington the first finished plans of the proposed work were presented. During the years that followed, construction of the new fort progressed steadily under the direction of his assistant, Capt. T. W. Maurice. On October 2, 1824, the fort was almost completed "in exact accordance with the plans." It had cost more than \$426,000.

The fort has been little altered since 1824. It is an enclosed masonry fortification, entered by a drawbridge

across the dry moat at the sally port. From above the main gateway you can see the entire 833-foot outline of the fort. Approximately 60 feet below the main fort is the outer V-shaped water battery, begun by L'Enfant, who also constructed the ditch on the southwest face and most of the one on the northeast face. They are still in an excellent state of preservation. A double stairway connects the parade ground with a tunnel leading to the lower work.

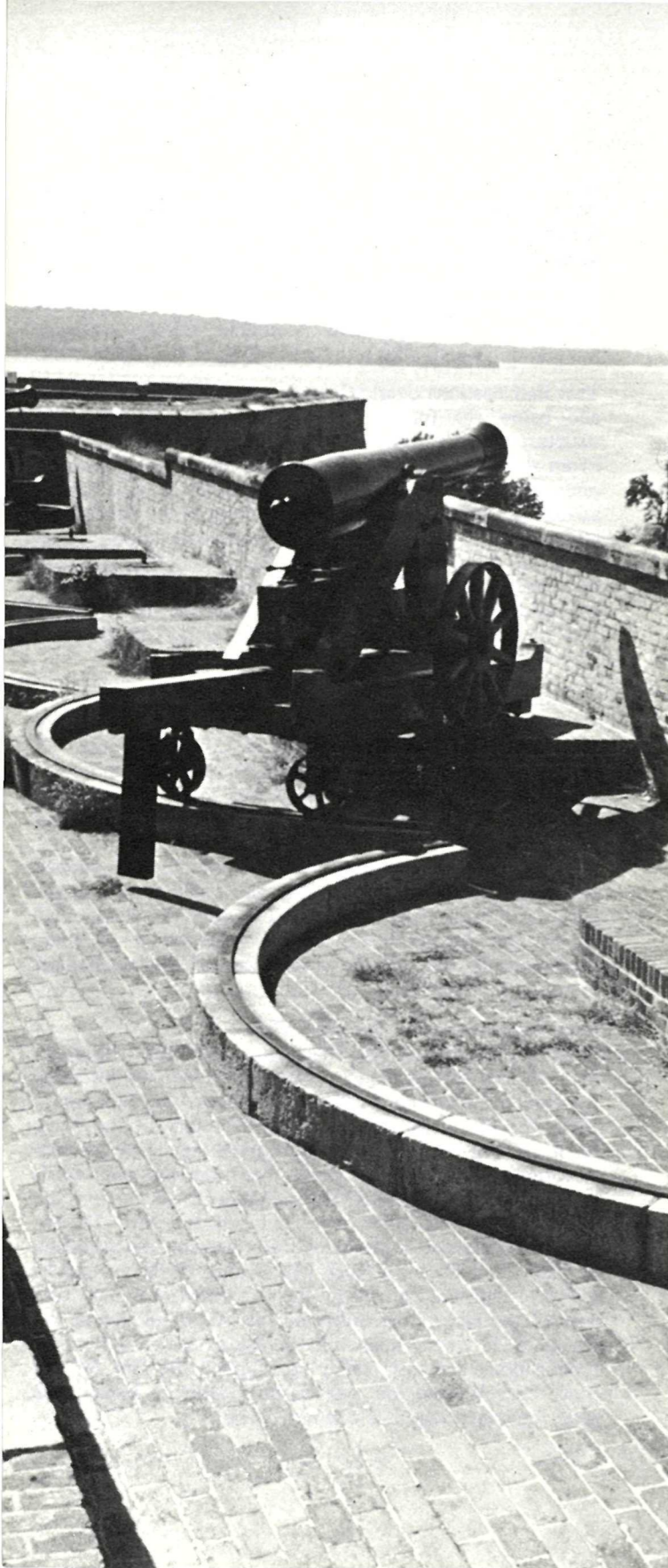
Two half bastions overlook and command the river above and below the fort. Below the ramparts of these two structures are the casemate, or bombproof, gun positions. From three levels (water battery, casemate positions, and ramparts), guns could deliver a devastating fire against an enemy fleet on the Potomac. The front of the structure—built of solid stone and brick masonry—is about 7 feet thick. On the parade ground are the officers' quarters and the soldiers' barracks. Flanking each of these structures is a magazine. A guardroom, containing two narrow cells and the office of the commanding officer, are in the main gateway structure.

Repairs and Alterations

During the 1840's an extensive project to repair and strengthen the fort was authorized. At this time, 88 permanent gun platforms for barbette carriages were constructed. Also a new drawbridge was built and the construction of the powder magazines improved. For land protection, the south wall, the weakest part of the fort, was raised and strengthened by the addition of a bastioned outerwork. Designed for six guns, this bastion covered the approaches from Piscataway Creek through the deep ravine in the rear of the fort. Physical evidence of all these improvements can still be seen. Most of the mechanism to raise the drawbridge remains in place.

Fort Washington and the Civil War

Although the garrison at Fort Washington had been withdrawn in 1853, the fort assumed a new importance as hostilities between the North and South grew near. On January 5, 1861, the first order issued by the Secretary of the Navy for the defense of the National Capital assigned 40 marines to protect Fort Washington, at that time the only fortification defending the city. During the war, troops from the 4th Artillery and other units manned the fort. Its importance decreased as attack by water became less probable. In 1864 Fort Foote, a work with strong earthen embankments to withstand attack by the new rifled ordnance, was constructed below Alexandria on the Maryland side of the Potomac. It was a main unit in the extensive system of fortifications that completely surrounded the city by this time. Fort Washington was of little military importance after the construction of this new work.



Fort Washington Since the Civil War

Fort Washington was abandoned in 1872, and 13 years later the obsolete muzzle-loading guns were removed. From 1896 to 1921 the reservation was headquarters for the Defenses of the Potomac. During this period, eight concrete batteries were constructed near the old fort. Some of these batteries mounted 10-inch disappearing guns. (Similar fortifications were built directly across the Potomac at Fort Hunt, Va., so that fire might be delivered against approaching enemy vessels from both sides of the river.) These concrete batteries can still be seen, although the guns have been removed. Nearest the old fort are Battery Decatur to the north; Battery Many, reached by the south exit of the fort; and Battery White, located at the apex of the old water battery.

Many buildings were erected on the reservation after 1896 as quarters for officers and enlisted men, but these have now been removed. In 1921, after the fort was no longer needed as a coast defense, it became the headquarters of the 12th Infantry.

Fort Washington was transferred from the War Department to the Department of the Interior in 1939. Shortly after Pearl Harbor it reverted to the War Department; later it was transferred to the Veterans' Administration. Finally, in 1946 the fort was returned to the Department of the Interior for park purposes.

About Your Visit

Fort Washington is on the Maryland side of the Potomac River. You can reach the fort by crossing the South Capitol Street Bridge and driving south on Int. 295 and east on Int. 495. Turn right onto Indian Head Highway (Md. 210) and again right onto Fort Washington Road.

The park is open daily from 7:30 a.m. to dark. The fort is open daily except December 25. Fort hours from September 1 through April 30 are 7:30 a.m. to 5 p.m.; May 1 through August 31 from 7:30 a.m. to 8 p.m. The museum is open every day from June 1 to Labor Day, and on weekends and holidays the rest of the year. Picnic sites are available.

Administration

Fort Washington is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. A superintendent, whose address is National Capital Parks-East, 1900 Anacostia Drive, SE, Washington, DC 20020, is in charge.

u.s. department of the interior
national park service

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