THE HISTORY AND CONSTRUCTION OF FORT WASHINGTON

FROM THE TIME OF ITS ERECTION UNTIL 1884.

FORT WASHINGTON, MARYLAND.

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MARYLAND BETA CHAPTER.

by

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SUMMARY

Fort Washington is a reservation situated on the left bank of the Potomac about fourteen miles below Washington, near the mouth of the Piscataway creek. It was one of the first military posts of the colonists, and its establishment dates back to 1645. George Washington advised the building of the fort proper in 1794.

During the second war with England, on August 27, 1814, the British sailed up the Potomac toward the Capitol. When the fleet reached Fort Washington, without any command from an external source, the fort was abandoned and the magazine blown up by the garrison. Not a single shot was fired. The British took possession of the fort, and with no other obstacles in their way, marched into Alexandria and Washington. The commander of the fort was court martialed shortly afterward, and dissmissed from the service. This was the only time the fort was needed, and it failed ignominiously.

The fort proper is an irregular bastioned structure of stone and brick masonry, and has a battery of like materials. The huge gray walls give the appearance of a Japanese castle.

In 1874 the Maryland legislature ceded jurisdiction of the property to the United States.

In 1884 the fort was deserted and overgrown with vines, and the buildings in a dilapidated condition. No definite plans for the future were known.

HISTORY AND CONSTRUCTION OF FORT WASHINGTON.

FORT WASHINGTON, MARYLAND.

Fort Washington, known as Fort Warburton prior to 1813, is a reservation situated on the left bank of the Potomac, about fourteen miles below the City of Washington, near the mouth of the Piscataway creek, and contains an area of 341.43 acres.

The fort can lay claim to being one of the oldest anglo-saxon settlements in the Western Hemisphere as well as one of the first military posts of the early colonists. Its establishment dates to 1645 when a garrison was erected at the mouth of the Piscataway creek in accordance with the defense act of the Province of Maryland, passed in that year. Thomas Watson was the first commander of the garrison and freemen of Saint George settlement constituted the military force.

Prior even to the coming of the white man was the site of this fort recognized as an important strategic outpost. The Indians had used its advantageous location for defense purposes both in the wars amongst themselves, as well as in their later struggles against the advancing white settlers. Here they made their last stand against the latter in 1695 when a force of twenty-five hundred Indians were defeated by a lesser number of Maryland and Virginia militia under the command of Colonel John Washington, grandfather of the first president.

On the 12th of May, 1794, Henry Knox, then Secretary of War under Washington, directed John Vermonnet to assume charge over the military works at Alexandria and Annapolis. The letter contained the following sentence: "The president of the United States, who is well acquainted with the river Potomac, conceives that a certain bluff of land on the Maryland side, near Mr. Digges, a point formed by the Eastern branch of the Potomac, would be a proper situation for the fortification to be erected." This was the origin of Fort Washington, and it is a tradition that Washington was impressed with the availability of the place for a military site as he looked out of his window at Mount Vernon toward the Capitol City. The sum to be expended for the fortification, however, was only three thousand dollars, exclusive of the cannon. This low estimate is explained in some degree by the fact that the parapets of the work were to be of earth, or where that could not be obtained of adhesive quality, the parapets were to be faced with strong timber, and filled with such earth as could be had. Seed of knot grass were to be sown on the parapets to bind the earth and sods together. Mr. Vermonnet was very distinctly informed that his employment did not confer or involve any military rank whatever. His compensation was four dollars per day.

The property on which the new fort was to stand was known as far back as 1742, as Warburton Manor, In that year it was willed by Charles Digges to his son Thomas A. Digges. The three acres which contained the bluff proper were pur-

chased from the latter for three thousand dollars, on April 15, 1808, although the site was officially selected and negotiations begun two years earlier. The erection of the fort was immediately commenced, but evidently the old idea of simple earthwork was not carried out, for on June 6, 1809, President Jefferson transmitted to congress a report on the fortifications of the United States in which he referred to Fort Washington as "a new inclosed work on the Potomac between Alexandria and Mount Vernon, of stone and brick masonry to which was attached a strong battery of like materials". The latter was said to be nearly completed and ready for the reception of cannon and garrison, which had been ordered and had arrived at the fort. The erection of an octagon tower on the eminence overlooking the fort was well under way. By December of the same year, nearly ten thousand dollars had been expended on the work. The octagon tower had been completed, together with a brick magazine and barracks. In December, 1811, Congress was informed that the tower was intended to defend the fort in the rear. It contained six guns, while there were thirteen guns in the fort proper.

But what was the condition of the fort, when at last the British obtained a foothold in the United States and were marching upon Washington? On the 25th of July, 1814, General Winder, whose military district had been enlarged to include the District of Columbia and a greater part of Maryland and Virginia contiguous to it, and who at once inspected Fort Washington, reported that the fort was

in several respects incomplete in its preparation for defense. He submitted a report to Lieutenant Edwards, then commanding, which was not encouraging. It called attention to the necessity of mounting heavy artillery in the block house; stating that the eighteen pound Columbiads were not mounted and that there was no tackle in the fort to mount them in position; that the gun platforms were so narrow that at the first discharge of the pieces, the latter would turn over, and that the five excellent eighteen pounders were mounted on the water battery, which would be useful in time of attack, but there was not a single pound of ammunition in the fort for them. Some of the gun carriages, also, were out of order and quite useless. Colonel Wadsworth, stationed at Greenleaf's Point, where the present Washington barracks are situated, sent two men to repair the gun carriages, and retorted to Lieutenant Edwards' criticisms by saying that the ammunition for the eighteen pounders " had long since been ordered, that the gun platforms were not too narrow, and that the other ordinance could be sent if he was directed to do so". Reports and communications were numerous and long.

During all this period of voluminous letter writing, the people of St. Mary's and Charles' counties were importuning the government for aid and protection. They could look out upon the Chesapeake and see the fleet of the British, while at short intervals their peace and comfort would be disturbed by parties which landed and foraged through the

country. On the 18th of August, 1814, the observer, who had been stationed at Point Lookout, sent word to Fort Washington that the enemy's fleet off that place had been reinforced by a formidable squadron of ships and vessels of various sizes. The next day, General Winder, realizing the graveness of the situation, asked the Secretary of War whether it would be expedient to have vessels ready to be sunk in the Potomac at Fort Washington or some other point, to obstruct the navigation. "Would it not be proper," he also asked, "to have at Fort Washington, to transport troops, all the boats that can be propelled by oars, that are at the City of Washington under the control of the Navy?, and would it not be wise to have the Marine corps reenforce the troops already at the fort?"

But these suggestions, if they could have availed anything, came too late. The land force of the British gradually closed in upon Washington. The militia of Washington and Georgetown were mustered in and marched bravely to a point four miles down the Eastern branch bridge on the road to upper Marlborough. On the first onslaught of the enemy at Bladensburg, the militia and the regulars broke ranks and fled precipitately, never stopping until they were at Tannallytown, two miles above Georgetown, and the enemy had entered the city.

When the danger thus realized was apprehended, the few remaining members of the common council of Alexandria held a meeting and decided that if the British fleet should

ever pass Fort Washington, they would surrender upon the best terms they could get. All their able bodied men had gone to the fort, or were with the army, and no one was left in the city but a few whose presence was needed, or who had secured substitutes, and old men, women, and children. When the British took possession of Washington, there was great excitement in the town. The President and the members of his cabinet fled and could not be found; and there was no military commander or officer to advise. Under these circumstances, the common council sent a delegation with a flag to Admiral Cockburn to know what treatment could be expected of the enemy should they reach the town. He replied that private property would be respected, and that whatever provisions were needed would be paid for.

"While these things were going on in Washington," says the report afterward made by the council to the Congressional Investigating Committee, "the British squadron had been gradually ascending the Potomac, and on the 27th of August, three days before the battle of Bladensburg, it reached Fort Washington. Upon the fort did the safety of Alexandria now depend. The citizens looked with great anxiety upon this point for protection, but to their great surprise and mortification and without the concurrence or wish of the municipal authority of the town or any members of it, the fort was abandoned, and the magazine blown up by the United States garrison on the evening of the 27th without firing a single gun.

Captain Gordon, who was commanding the British fleet, gives the following account of the affair:

"The following morning, August 27th, to our great joy the wind became fair, and we made all sail up the river, which now assumed a more pleasing aspect. At five o'clock in the afternoon, Mount Vernon, the retreat of the illustrious Washington, opened to our view and showed us for the first time since we entered the Potomac, a gentleman's residance. Higher up the river on the opposite side Fort Washington appeared to our anxious eyes and to our great satisfaction assailable.

"A little before sunset the squadron anchored just out of gunshot, the bomb vessels at once took up their position to cover the frigates in the projected attack at daylight next morning and began throwing shells. The garrison to our great surprise, retreated from the fort; and a short time afterwards Fort Washington was blown up, which left the Capitol of America and the populous town of Alexandria open to the squadron, without the loss of a man. It was too late to ascertain whether this catastrophe was occassioned by one of our shells, or whether it had been blown up by the garrison, but the opinion was in favor of the latter. Still we were at a loss to account for such an extraordinary step.

"The position was good, and its capture could have cost us at least fifty men or more, had it been properly defended; besides an unfavorable wind and many other chances were in their favor, and we could have only destroyed it had

we succeeded in the attempt.

"At daylight the ship moored under the battery and completed its destruction. The guns were spiked by the enemy; we otherwise mutilated them and destroyed the carriages.

"Fort Washington was a most respectable defense; it mounts two fifty-two pounders, two thirty-two pounders, eight twenty-four pounders; in a martello tower, two thirty-two pounders, with two loop-holes for musketry; and a battery in the rear mounting two twelve and six pound field pieces."

The relinquishment of the fort decided Alexandria's fate. The British fleet was met immediately after it passed Fort Washington by a delegation of citizens, among them the mayor, but were informed by Captain Gordon that Admiral Cockburn would make known his terms when he got opposite the city. Soon afterward, the fleet, consisting of seven vessels, with a total of one hundred and twenty-eight guns, were ranged in a semi-circle opposite the town, ready to bombard it. Under these circumstances, the terms of capitulation were easily arranged.

Fort Washington at the time it was blown up contained nineteen guns and a garrison of about fifty men. The officer commanding was Captain Sam T. Dyson. He was quickly called to account on the 29th of August, thirty-six hours after he had abandoned the fort. Secretary of War Armstrong sent an officer to him for a written or verbal report of the causes which led him to vacate the post committed to his charge, the orders under which he acted, and from whom re-

ceived. Captain Dyson's reply was as follows:

"The orders received from Brigadier General Winder through Major Hite verbally on the 24th instant were, in case I was pressed by or heard of any enemy in my rear, to spike my guns and make my escape over the river. The enemy approached by water on the 27th, and we had learned on that day through several channels that the enemy had been reenforced at Benedict two thousand strong, and that they were on the march to cooperate with the fleet in addition to the force which left the city. Under all the circumstances the officers under my command were consulted and it was thought best to abandon the fort and effect a retreat. The force under my command was not thought equal to the defense of the place."

The Court Martial which was convened thought differently, and on the 17th of the following November, they returned a finding to the effect that Captain Dyson "misbehaved himself before the enemy and shamefully abandoned the fort and post which he then and there commanded and which it was his bounden duty to defend." The recommendation that he be dismissed from the service of the United States was at once approved by the Secretary of War.

The Fort Washington, as it appeared in 1884, was begun in 1815 upon almost the same site as the old work, and was finished in 1824, its total cost up to the latter date being $556,000. It is situated on a high ridge at the confluence of the Piscataway Creek and the Potomac River, about

fourteen miles below Washington, and its picturesque stone walls are familiar to the thousands who pass it on pleasure trips down the river, or pilgrimages to Mount Vernon. Behind the fort is a deep ravine, three hundred feet wide at the top, with sides sloping precipitously about eighty feet, terminating in a narrow plane about one hundred feet wide. The ridge is composed of clay, sand, and marl, and many fossils have been found in the vicinity of the marl beds, which open on the river bank. The sides of the ravine were formerly heavily timbered but this was cut away during the Civil War, when the fort was garrisoned by forty marines solely for the protection of public property, and are covered with a vigorous growth of young trees, principally chesnut and locust. The channel, however, is not more than five hundred feet, and is entirely on the fort or Maryland side of the river. The Maryland shore is gradual sloping, sandy and hard, the Virginia shore being muddy and flat. Both sides are covered in summer by the ordinary river grass, which is exposed at low tide, the rise and fall of which is between five and six feet.

The fort proper is an irregular bastioned structure, with a water battery in front. It has high walls of stone and brick, and its exterior view is said to resemble in many particulars the old feudal castles in Japan. It commands the river for a point considerably below Mount Vernon, while looking toward the city from the Western parapet, the dome of the Capitol, the Washington Monument, and other

land marks are plainly seen. It was garrisoned during the war, although, fortunately, its services were never needed. The Alexandria Gazette published the following article on January 7, 1861:

By Telegraph to the Gazette.
Washington, D.C., Jan. 6, 1861.

Extract:

"The course of the President in garrisoning Fort Washington is severely condemned, and the Abolitionists who have brought all this trouble upon us will have a terrible crime to answer for."

Local Items.

"Fort Washington - Within a few years past this work has been put in a condition of complete defense against attack by land as well as by water.

"It is a bastioned work, unaccessible to escalade in the rear, and protected from assault in the front by a ditch which is commanded in all its parts by flank vines of grape and cannister. The greater part, if not all of its armament is understood to be at the work, and the magazine is also understood to be amply supplied with all the munitions necessary for its greatest efficiency."

The fort was always more or less unhealthy, and in August, 1870, every man, woman, and child on the reservation was attacked with intermittent or remittent fever. The fort was evacuated in September, 1872, In December, 1878, General Ayres was placed in charge, but on the 31st of May, 1884, the

fort was turned over to the Engineer Department for modification and repair. From 1872 to 1884 its garrison consisted of one ordinance sergeant. On April 11, 1874, an act of the Maryland legislature was approved, ceding jurisdiction over the property to the United States, the state reserving the right to serve criminal and civil processes within the limits of the reservation. The provisions are as follows:

"Sect. 1. Be it enacted, etc.

"That the jurisdiction and control over the residue of the lands owned by the United States, and constituting the site of Fort Washington, in the county of Prince George, and the jurisdiction and control over the lands hereinafter described, or any portion thereof, in said county, that may be hereafter conveyed by deed, duly executed, acknowledged and recorded to the United States, and the water, water rights, and all other rights appertaining thereto, be and the same is hereby ceded and vested in the United States of America for military and naval purposes; the said cession, as to said land that may hereafter be conveyed, to take effect whenever the same shall be so conveyed; beginning for the said land to be hereafter conveyed. ******** The same comprising the two parcels of ground, parts from the Warburton Manor, and mentioned and conveyed in a deed from John Johnson and Thomas S. Alexander, trustees, to William Kerley; recorded under the land records of Prince George's County, liber J.B.B., No. 4, folio 806, etc:, provided always, that this cession and jurisdiction are granted upon the express

condition that the state shall retain a concurrent jurisdiction with the United States in and on the said ceded lands and territory so far as that all civil and such criminal process as may issue under the authority of this State, against any person or persons with crimes committed without said lands and ceded territory, may be executed therein, in the same way and manner as though this cession and consent had never been made or granted, except so far as such process, the real and personal property of the United States within the said ceded territory.

"Be it enacted that the said lands over which the jurisdiction is granted by this act, together with all personal property which may thereafter be within the bounds thereof, belonging to the United States, shall be exonerated and discharged from all taxes and assessments which may be at any time imposed by the authority of this State, when and so long as the said lands, or portion thereof, respectively, are and shall remain the property of the United States, and be used for the purpose aforesaid."

The officer in charge of the fort in 1884 was Ordinance Sergeant R. F. Joyce. His life at the fort was a very quiet one, considering that he had spent twenty-eight years in the army, sixteen of which were on the Texas frontier, at Forts MacIntosh and Ringgold, fighting Indians. He was detailed to the fort in December, 1883.

If Fort Washington has never known a battle of powder and shot, it has been the subject of lengthy conflict in

which pens and paper formed the ammunition. The reservation on which it is situated has a history of litigation extending over ten years. On the 31st of August, 1815, some nine acres were purchased from T. A. Digges and William D. Digges for $8,461 for the purpose of enlarging the reservation upon which the new fort was to be built. Another strong consideration urged for the purchase was that the small area previously occupied had enabled an enterprising person to run a tavern and grog-shop immediately under the walls of the fort, "defeating the most zealous efforts of the officers to preserve discipline among the men." In surveying the land conveyed to the United States, however, a piece was left to the proprietor, with singular improvidence, between the fort and the river, and in erecting the fort, with still greater improvidence, a number of brick buildings were erected on this land. Part of the fortification was projected, and had been partially erected on the property, when the discovery was made that it did not belong to the government, and the work suddenly stopped.

A long litigation between the United States and Digges ensued. The property in question measured several acres, and the first arbitrators appraised the value at $29,600. This was afterward objected to by Secretary of War Barbour as excessive and it being found that Digges owed the government $13,000 with $7,000 interest additional, on a judgement against him, it was proposed to him that his property be taken as payment of the debt. He objected but Con-

gress would accept no other arrangement, not even though his council, Moses Tabbs, in a memorial to that body said that "even the slumbering spirit of justice breathes upon the claims of Dudley Digges." Afterward Digges died, and his widow, Norah, in May, 1833, finally accepted the governments proposition and the long dispute was ended.

In 1884, A Washington newspaper man described the fort as follows:

"An air of desertion hangs over Fort Washington today. Its buildings, said to have been imported from England, still stand in a remarkable state of preservation, but they are old and tenantless. The picturesque gate, with its drawbridge over the moat, is overgrown with vines, snakes creep through the tall rank grass, and lizards of brilliant hues are the only sentinels who mount guard upon the walls. Cannons of patterns long since obsolete, lie imbedded in the earth and grass, or frown, with unconcious impotence from the casemate windows. From little crevices between piled up cannon balls the long stalks of golden rod find their upward way. The brick passage ways are overgrown with grass and weeds, and scarlet trumpet flowers and other creeping vines are fast covering the walls.

"There are no incidents connected with the fort to give it tragic interest. It never fired a shot in its own defense. At best the sergeant who accompanies you in the round of the examination can only point out the old guard rooms, one of the floors still indented with a brick torn

up from the floor by a drunken and excited prisoner. Or if you notice that the steps leading to the platform over the drawbridge gate are nicked, the sergeant tells you that sometime before he came in charge, a party of men landed from a boat, entered the fort from the rear, and carried off the brass gun which was once used to fire the morning and evening salutes. The steps leading down to casemates are also chipped, but this was done by children on picnic parties rolling cannon balls from the top to the bottom. Not even the officers who command the fort at various times had lives of more than ordinary interest.

"A wooden sundial upon two sides of a chimney is a relic of ancient times in the fort, and is remarkable in being upright, the majority of sundials being horizontal.

"Ammunition as old as the fort and utterly useless is stored in the magazine. Every nook and corner in the fort is a quaint picture in itself, but perhaps one of the prettiest subjects of an artist's pencil is a casemate reached by an underground passage. Here four brass howitzers point outward with apparent fierceness, but a graceful network of green vines, the leaves delicately transparent in the sunlight, almost obstruct the view through the portholes. It is as pretty as a poem."

Time has made many changes in Fort Washington. On February 2, 1825, General Macomb, Chief of Engineers, made a report in which he said:

"The position of Fort Washington is exceedingly

strong, and the work is built of the most durable materials and executed in the best manner. Its batteries command completely the channel of the River Potomac and cover the District of Columbia, including the National Capitol, from attack by water. Fort Washington, on the land side is very strong, being defended by high walls and a deep ravine. It is so well situated that it cannot be taken unless invested and regularly besieged, and even then it may be considered competent to hold out until properly relieved by the forces of the country. It may be proper to remark that the selection of the site was made in 1806 before the council of the Board of Engineers."

It was believed in 1884, that if the selection for the site was then open, a position further down the river, about Cedar Point, would be chosen, not because the position was itself stronger on the land side, or that it more completely commanded the river, but simply because it commanded to the enemy a point of attack at a greater distance from the Capitol, and even as to this point, Fort Washington being retained, and completely commanding the River, would enable the government, by temporary works at the lower point, erected at a small cost, to prevent an enemy from passing that position, as he would have no adequate inducement to run the slightest hazard when knowing that the batteries of Fort Washington would put it out of his power to do any injury.

On the 1st of August, 1884, Major Peter C. Hains, after inspection of the place, made a report to the Chief of

Engineers in which he said:

"The masonry of the old works is still in good condition, but as the fort was designed more than one-half a century ago, it is not adapted to receive guns of modern size, or to defensive purposes against such guns. * * * * * At the present time the defenses known as Fort Washington consist practically of four fifteen foot gun platforms, without a parapet in front of them and without magazines. The twenty-four pound barbette guns in the old fort are practically worthless, as they could do no harm. This fort, together with Fort Foote, a work of less strength, if that be possible, constituted the defenses of the capitol of a great nation. The buildings unoccupied by troops, are generally in a dilapidated condition, but no repairs are recommended as it is of more importance to mount a few guns and to finish the magazines and parapets.

"It is thus probable that the fort, as it is at present constructed, will soon be a thing of the past. Of course the site will not be abandoned, but the character of the fortification will be almost entirely changed. When the work of remodeling will begin is a matter dependent upon Congressional appropriation. Already, however, proposals have been invited for the removal to Governor's Island, New York, of twenty-six thousand pounds of old ordinance in the fort. The greater portion of this material will be sold as old iron at half a cent a pound, although it will cost at least three-quaters of a cent a pound to transport it. When

it has been removed the fort will be ready for remodeling. The battery, previously mentioned, which was begun upon plans approved in 1870 and upon which work was suspended for lack of funds, will be finished; as it is modern in construction. The Potomac may be deprived of a picturesque spot, but there will be more safety in time of war."


"WARBURTON MANOR"
PATENTED 1661
HOME OF THE DIGGES FAMILY.
(DESCENDANTS OF EDWARD DIGGES,
GOVERNOR OF VIRGINIA, 1652-1668)
THE MOST INTIMATE FRIENDS OF
GEORGE AND MARTHA WASHINGTON
IN PRINCE GEORGE'S COUNTY,
WHERE THEY VISITED MANY TIMES.
WASHINGTON
SPENT HIS FORTY-THIRD BIRTHDAY HERE.
NOW SITE OF FORT WASHINGTON
DESIGNED BY L'ENFANT, 1814.
GEORGE WASHINGTON BICENTENNIAL 1932

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