



Sketching the Civil War Defenses of Washington

Visit Fort Marcy or Fort Ethan Allen today and you will see vague outlines of the walls and trenches that once protected an important approach to the capital. In September 1861 federal troops crossed the Potomac River, pitched their tents, and hastily constructed earthworks to guard against a Confederate attack on Chain Bridge.

The Civil War brought changes to the land around the forts that incorporated cutting-edge military technology, re-worked transportation systems, and challenged the balance of power between individuals and their government.

The Route

This tour leads you along sections of the Potomac Heritage Trail and city streets between Fort Marcy and Fort Ethan Allen. Stop #1 and Stop # 5 are parks where you can spend time exploring the fortifications.

Length: 1 ½ mile (one way)

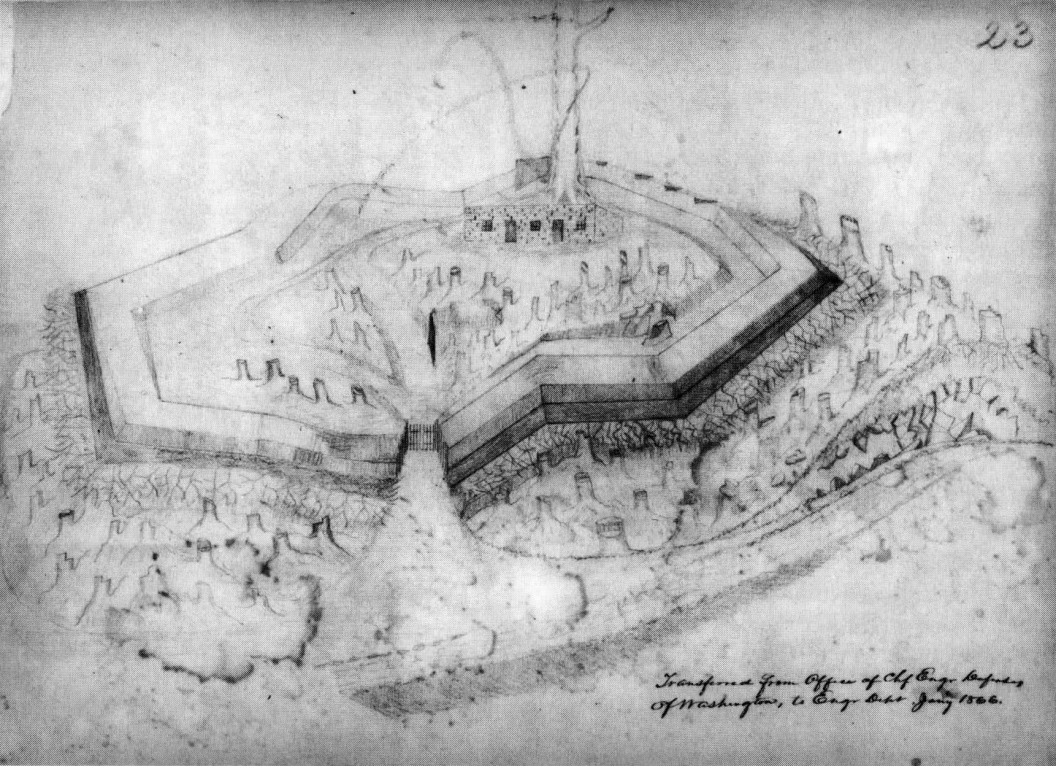
Number of stops: 5

Time required: About 45 minutes each way

Accessibility: The route between Fort Marcy and Chain Bridge is narrow and rugged. The route between Chain Bridge and Fort Ethan Allen follows paved streets, but some portions do not have sidewalks. Use care in curves and when crossing intersections.

In an emergency: Call 9-1-1

If you have any questions, please phone (202) 604-0854.



Above: A soldier's sketch of Fort Marcy, surrounded by the stumps of cut trees. Note the abatis of sharpened tree branches at the base of its walls. (Image courtesy of the National Archives)

1 Digging in at Fort Marcy

"Spades were trumps and every man held a full hand." — An observer from the 79th New York Highlanders

Workers moved massive amounts of earth at the beginning of the Civil War, turning Washington, D.C., into one of the most heavily fortified cities in the world.

The 12-20 foot thick parapets, dry moats, and rifle trenches of Fort Marcy were repeated at many of the other 67 forts and 93 batteries ringing the capital.

From the southeast corner of the Fort Marcy parking lot follow the Potomac Heritage Trail toward Theodore Roosevelt Island. Carefully rock-hop across Pimmit Run and follow the water as it curves through mixed hardwood forest.

2 A Natural Refuge

“There is no shade whatever... The country has a grim, ravaged look, as far as you can see.” — An observer from the 10th Rhode Island Regiment

A mix of hardwoods like oak and beech line the banks of Pimmit Run. You may be able to find a few large, old trees along the trail, but soldiers cut down almost everything that obstructed their view of Chain Bridge in 1861.

Since many of the Civil War Defenses of Washington have become parks, the corridors that soldiers once used to move from one safe haven to another are now used by wildlife.

Continue to follow the trail up and right toward Chain Bridge.

3 The “New” Military Road

“These great immense piles of brush and things are fixed up here and there and every where and the roads, completely stopped...”
— Ann S. Frobel, a resident of Alexandria, Virginia, in 1863

The Civil War turned the lives of citizens upside-down, especially in and around Washington, D.C. Even with 32 miles of new road built to connect isolated defenses, people found it harder to get where they needed to go. Federal troops crowded out civilians on bridges and set up roadblocks that slowed down traffic.



Above: Federal wagons come down the Leesburg & Georgetown Turnpike (today's Chain Bridge Road). The newly built Military Road crosses Pimmit Run and heads uphill to Fort Ethan Allen. Glebe Road and Military Road follow roughly this route today. (Image from *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, January 18, 1862; courtesy of George Mason University)

At Chain Bridge turn right, cross under the George Washington Memorial Parkway, and follow 41st Street uphill.

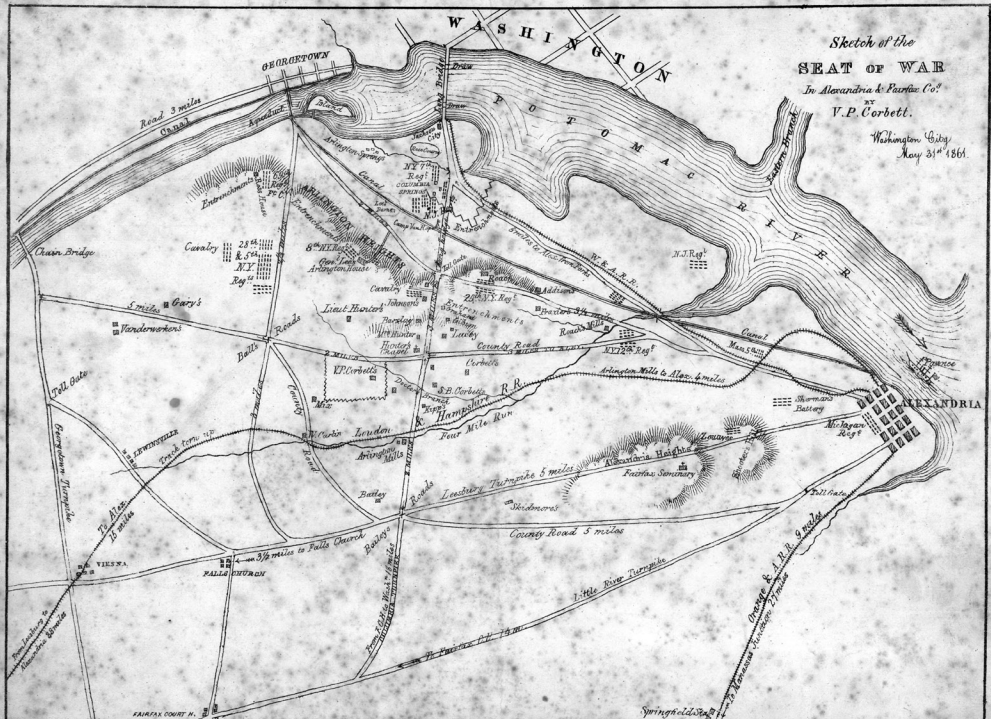
4 Balloon Ascensions

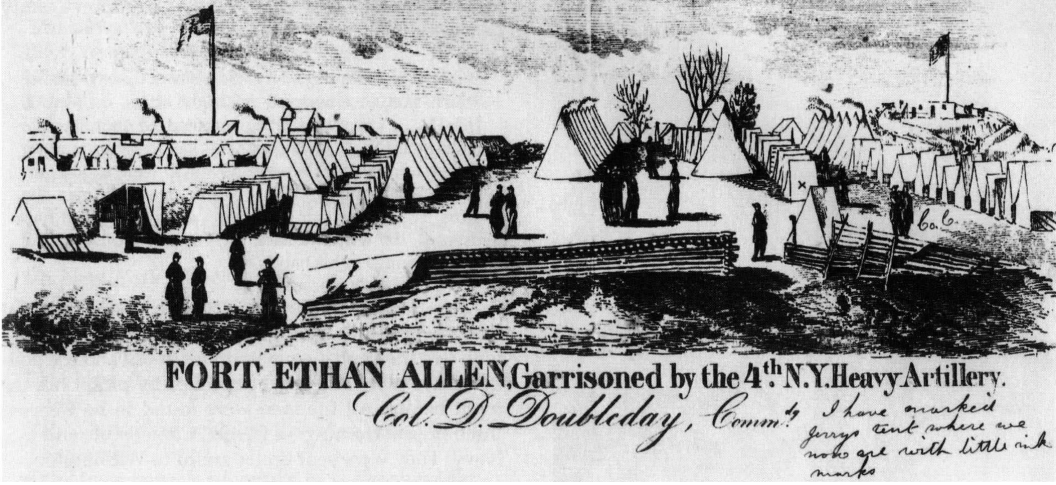
“If we fire to the right of Falls Church, let a white flag be raised in the ballon; if to the left, let it be lowered; if over, let it be shown stationary; if under, let it be waved occasionally.”
(Directions given to Thaddeus Lowe by General William F. “Baldy” Smith)

On September 24, 1861 batteries around Chain Bridge were noisily firing on a spot three miles distant. They adjusted their aim on Confederate forces in Falls Church, Virginia, with directions relayed from a balloon.

The pilot, Balloon Corps founder Thaddeus Lowe, had already proven his newfangled device by using it to observe and map enemy movements. Federal generals were impressed with the potential of military aviation.

Continue up the paved trail to its intersection with Randolph Street. Turn right and walk south on Randolph Street. Turn left to cross the overpass of Glebe Road and continue on Old Glebe Road.





Above: Fort Ethan Allen Camp stationery used by the 4th New York Heavy Artillery. (Image courtesy of Walton H. Owen II)

5 Fort Ethan Allen

“The old Civil War Forts surrounding the city are not only points of interest but also include points from which some of the best views of the city can be obtained. A parkway connecting these points would form a most useful adjunct to the park system in the District...” (H.R. 10695, a bill introduced in November 1919)

A proposal to connect many of the remaining Civil War Defenses of Washington with a parkway never passed in the House of Representatives. Nevertheless, several of the forts and batteries became public land.

Some, like Fort Marcy, were included in the comprehensive “park and playground” system envisioned in the Capper-

Crampton Act of 1924. Others, like Fort Ethan Allen, were preserved by county governments.

The land under both Fort Marcy and Fort Ethan Allen belonged to Gilbert Vanderwerken at the start of the Civil War. He attempted to recover costs for the use of his land and timber during the war but eventually relinquished all claim against the U.S. government.

Left: A sketch of forces arrayed around Washington, D.C., drawn from one of Thaddeus Lowe’s balloons. Chain Bridge is in the upper far left; Falls Church is in the middle lower left. (Image courtesy of the Library of Congress)

