



Archeology Program

National Park Service
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Archeology and History in Rock Creek Park

Fieldwork has recently been completed for the third year of a four-year archeological survey and inventory of Rock Creek Park in Washington, DC, funded by the NPS, National Capital Region (NCR). The finds to date include a series of extraordinarily rich Native American camp sites used repeatedly between 2500 BC and AD 1400, colonial tenancies, nineteenth-century dwellings, and Civil War military artifacts from the Battle of Fort Stevens in 1864. Documentary research has uncovered many interesting details about the history of the park, and many of the archeological sites can be associated with known historical characters, from John Carroll of Annapolis to African-American tenants of the 1890s. The story of the park is long and fascinating, and this study is helping to bring it to light.



Officers and men of Company F, 3rd Massachusetts Heavy Artillery, in Rock Creek Park's Fort Stevens.

The Rock Creek Park Archeological Survey

Rock Creek Park is a 1755-acre wooded oasis in the heart of Washington, DC. Besides the main block of land along Rock Creek, the park includes numerous parcels scattered across northwest Washington which total an additional thousand acres. Before the park was established in the 1890s this land had been inhabited for thousands of years, and dozens of people still lived there. An archeological survey of the park has been underway since 2003 and should be completed in 2007. The project has been funded through the NPS Systemwide Archeological Inventory Program, and the work is being conducted by The Louis Berger Group.

Ancient Native Americans



Native American pottery sherd recovered near Little Falls in Rock Creek Park. (NPS photo)

The park contains numerous small Native American camp sites as well as several other remarkable sites. Along Piney Branch, a tributary of Rock Creek, are large beds of quartzite cobbles that were intensively quarried between 2500 - 2000 BC. These quarries were investigated in the 1890s by William Henry Holmes of the Smithsonian's Bureau of Ethnography, and they played an important role in resolving an early debate about the antiquity of human presence in the Americas. Working in the quarries along Rock Creek, Holmes was able to show that what others took to be ancient hand axes were just the early stages of a manufacturing process that eventually led to finely made spear points. Recent study showed that one of Holmes' largest quarry sites is still intact in the park; the site was mapped during this project, and a number of bifaces and a stone ax or maul were found.

The area around Little Falls, at the head of navigation on the Potomac River, has long been known as a center of ancient Indian activity, and many sites have been recorded. During the recent survey an extraordinary group of sites was found in the narrow valley of a small stream near the falls. On small level areas within the valley, which are only 50 to 75 feet wide, testing produced 1000 to 1900 artifacts in each 3x3-foot square. Up to 24 projectile points and 182 sherds of pottery were found in a single unit. These artifacts show that the sites were used repeatedly from 2500 BC to after AD 1000. It seems that this small, protected valley was used by people who were camping at the foot of the falls, possibly for winter shelter or to keep their presence hidden from enemies. This valley could also have been part of a portage way around the falls.

Colonial Frontier

Documentary research showed that a fort used by the Maryland Rangers in the 1690s, when

the frontier of the colony was under heavy Indian attack, was either in or near the park. Unfortunately, no archeological evidence of the fort was found. Three domestic sites dating to the 1700s were identified during the survey. During this period the park belonged to absentee landlords, so these sites represent the residences of tenants. Most of the work of clearing the land and extending the frontier in Maryland was done by tenants, yet we know little about them. They were a mobile group, often moving on in search of better land after only a few years, leaving few traces in the written records. The pottery, glass, and metal recovered from these sites may, therefore, help us document the lives of these elusive people.

The Civil War

Rock Creek Park includes several of the forts built to defend Washington during the Civil War. During this project a large dump dating to the war was found in a wooded ravine near one of those forts, and a number of small earthworks have been newly documented. The Washington forts saw action only once, during the large Confederate raid on Washington in July, 1864. Confederate General Jubal Early's men advanced on Washington down a turnpike east of Rock Creek but were halted by the guns of Fort Stevens. They then tried to bypass the fort by advancing down the Rock Creek valley, where the rugged terrain offered some cover. However, they were stopped by a hastily assembled force of dismounted cavalry, War Department clerks, and garrison troops, backed by artillery. By this time reinforcements were arriving in Washington from the Army of the Potomac, and Early decided to head back the way he had come. During the current project a number of bullets and artillery shell fragments were found in the park, allowing us to identify positions taken by the Confederate attackers.



Figure of cart driver from a metal toy made circa 1900, from an African-American residence. (NPS photo)

Nineteenth-Century Life

When it was established formally as a public park, the area included two large mansions (the residents of one fought the seizure of their land all the way to the Supreme Court), dozens of smaller dwellings, and two active merchant mills. Archeological testing has helped to locate features around the mansions and mills. A number of tenant houses have also been located. Documentary research showed that most of the tenants in the park were African American or Irish, and we have learned that one of the tenant sites was occupied in 1890 by the family of Sarah Whitby, a widowed African-American laundress with seven children.

Learn more about [Rock Creek Park](#).

This report was contributed by John Bedell, The Louis Berger Group.

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