



Archeology Program

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Fort Washington Park Yields Unusual Find

In the film, "Raiders of the Lost Ark," archeologist Indiana Jones undertakes a large excavation to uncover important artifacts. While it is true that most archeological sites are buried in the ground, that is not the only place that artifacts are found. Archeologists also recover artifacts from shipwrecks on the ocean floor, from exposed locations on mountain tops, and from hidden places such as caves or the recesses of rock shelters. Archeologists study the material remains of past human behaviors, meaning the objects that people used and the relationships between objects and aspects of the environment. This interest in material objects as a primary source of information is one of the key things that separate archeologists from historians. For historians, the main source of information is the written record. Archeologists, especially those who study time periods when written records were kept, may also use written records in their research, but the primary source of information continues to be material objects and the relationships between them.

In the spring of 2006, a cache of objects was found in an attic of the Enlisted Men's Barracks at [Fort Washington](#), a fortification overlooking the Potomac River in Maryland, now part of the NPS National Capital Parks. NPS archeological staff investigated the discovery. There, NPS staff found a collection of diverse items dating to 1861-1869. These objects have the potential to enlarge our understanding of living conditions at the fort during and after the Civil War.



Fort Washington's enlisted men's barracks.

Fort Washington

Fort Washington is located on the east side of the Potomac River, near the mouth of Piscataway Creek. Except for a few guns at the Washington Arsenal, Fort Washington was the only defense for the Nation's Capital until the Civil War when a circle of temporary forts was built around the city. The first Fort Washington was completed in 1809 and guarded the nation's capital until it was destroyed by its own garrison in 1814. Twelve days later Major Pierre L'Enfant was sent to construct new defenses but worked on the fort for only a brief period before Lieutenant Colonel Walker K. Armistead replaced him. Fortifications were completed on October 2, 1824. Extensive remodeling was performed in the 1840s and the first guns were mounted in 1846.

From 1853 to the beginning of the Civil War the fort was not active, with only a small staff and munitions in storage. However, when the southern states seceded from the Union, many of the Federal forts and arsenals in those states were seized by Confederate troops. Fort Washington faced the same danger, being in a slave state with a large secessionist following, and the only fort providing defense to the national capital at this time. On January 5, 1861, Ordnance Sergeant Joseph Cameron asked for troops to be sent to Fort Washington. The next day, Captain Algernon S. Taylor and 40 U.S. Marines arrived from the Navy Yard to hold the fort until trained artillery units could be sent. By late January, troops began to arrive. Companies of the First and Fourth Artillery as well as numerous state artillery units passed through the post during the war.

In 1872, the garrison was removed and additional property purchased to construct a new defense system. Funds for the project were withdrawn and the post was abandoned for the next twenty years. Prior to World War I Fort Washington was downgraded to harbor defense and the large guns removed. During the war the post was used as a staging area for troops being sent to France. In 1939, the post was abandoned and turned over to the Director of Public Buildings for use as a terminal point for a bridge across the Potomac and a parkway to be built along the shore. Before the transfer was complete, the United States entered World War II. Fort Washington was returned to the Army and became the home of the Adjutant General's School.

The Adjutant General's School graduated 300 students every two months and trained over 1,500 officers during their first six months of operation. The school also included an officer's candidate course that commissioned 200 new Lieutenants every six weeks. On March 3, 1943, the [67th Women's Army Auxiliary Corps \(WAAC\)](#) Detachment reported to Fort Washington and became part of the Adjutant General's School's Service Company.

On August 31, 1943, the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps of 60,000 was disbanded and the women dismissed from the service. The next day the newly formed Women's Army Corps enlisted those that chose to remain in service, and offered full military rank and benefits for service connected injuries. The new corps also provided protection for the women if captured by enemy forces. As members of the auxiliary, the women would have been treated as civilians, but now they were soldiers and eligible for the rights afforded prisoners of war.



Women's Army Corps members in the "WAC Shack," a former Coast Artillery barracks.

The Women's Armed Service Act of 1947 made women a permanent part of the armed forces. Twenty years later, in 1967, a law that restricted women to 2% of the total force and limiting their rank to Major was repealed. Women became eligible to participate in the Reserve Officer Training Corps in 1972 and in 1978 the Women's Army Corps was disbanded. Today women serve side by side with the men, instead of in a separate corps, and are eligible for full military benefits.

After the war the Veterans Administration managed the post hospital and other government agencies occupied some of the buildings. In 1946, Fort Washington was transferred to the Department of the Interior.

The Enlisted Men's Barracks

The Enlisted Men's Barracks were completed in 1824. Unlike Officers Quarters, which had interior stairwells, exterior stairs connected the upper and lower floors of the two story building. Originally the barracks was built to house only 60 soldiers. With the outbreak of the Civil War, more troops came to Fort Washington than it could house comfortably. Regular troops stationed at the post may have had first choice of lodging in the fort. We also know from written records that two Pennsylvania companies were staying together in a small unidentifiable house, presumably outside of the fort. On May 2, 1861, the Washington artillerists prepared quarters in the water battery outside the fort near the river. They put in floors and tables. The Logan Guards were also in unknown quarters on a hill outside the fort. Other buildings and tents were probably set up to relieve the overcrowding.

Records at the fort tell us how many enlisted men were present during the Civil War. In 1861, the fort had 280 enlisted men at the post, which included Company D, 1st United States Artillery, and two companies of recruits, the Logan Guards, and the Washington Artillerists. In June 1862, there were 272 enlisted men; in March 1863, 146 enlisted men; in May 1864, 146 enlisted men; and in July 1865, 142 enlisted men.

Overcrowding continued to be a problem after the war. In 1868, Assistant Surgeon Alfred Delaney wrote that the room in the barracks for Company A, Fourth U.S. Artillery, only had 3,861 cubic feet; he deducted 108 cubic feet that were taken by the chimney, and 100 cubic feet for the bunks. The remaining space had to house 12-18 men.

A Cache in the Attic

During the over-crowded time of the Civil War or immediately after, a portion of the attic had been lathed and plastered, indicating that the space may have been used as living quarters. Behind a low wall, under the eaves, NPS archeologists found miscellaneous bottles and bottle fragments, cans, oyster shells, one lead ball from canister shot, and shoes and shoe fragments.



Cache of bottles, shoe parts, and oyster shells found behind a wall in the barracks attic.

Most of the bottles found were fragments, but several were whole. The contents of the intact bottles were alcohol and medicine. Based on the shape and size of blacking bottles from that time period, one bottle may have had shoe polish. Research shows that sutlers (peddlers) that visited the fort during the Civil War did sell shoe polish.

The presence of alcohol bottles suggests that alcohol may have been consumed and concealed from commanding officers at the fort. Research has found that sutlers during the Civil War sold beer. After the war, at least one sutler at the fort sold selling ale. At this point, it is hard to tell which bottles held beer and which held ale.

Soldiers on the post could have received medicine from doctors treating an illness. They could have also purchased patent medicines. One of the bottles found in the barracks at Fort Washington had fragments of a label that had the word "cures" that might have been patent medicine. Patent medicines were not effective, but did contain alcohol. Soldiers could get alcohol by purchasing patent medicine if beer and ale were not available from the sutler. These products also had extracts from opium, and morphine.

One of the recovered cans was used to pack sardines. A gold label was still soldered on the side. The label said "Burguin sardines, Port Louis Morihan." Research suggests that the sardines were packed in Port Louis, Moribhan, France.

A total of 22 shoe fragments were found. Most of the fragments were soles. A few were a little more complete. One heel had extra nails, indicating possible repair work. Perhaps the missing portions of the shoes were re-purposed to repair others. Three of the fragments were, demonstrably, from women's shoes. Two of the shoes were mostly the bottom soles, and the other one was almost a complete boot.

The presence of women's shoes raises interesting questions. While married officers were allowed to have their wives stay with them in the Officer's Quarters, barracks for married enlisted men did not accommodate women, especially during the Civil War. The wives of enlisted men stayed outside the fort. How did the women's shoes get there? Did the wife of an enlisted man sneak in with help from guards at the front gate? Did an enterprising cobbler among the enlisted men set up a business in the cramped space of the attic?

Soldiers have always found ways to entertain themselves when not on duty. Reading, drawing, or playing games were options, as evident by the handmade checkerboard found between two studs. On a nearby ceiling was a portrait of a man. The portrait looks like it was done with soot from a candle. Staff speculated as to who it was—Abraham Lincoln maybe? Gloria Swift, curator at Ford's Theater indicated it looked more like the Confederate President Jefferson Davis (pers. comm.).

Another interesting find was an iron ball from canister shot. The iron ball would have been placed into a canister with other iron balls, sometimes packed in sawdust. Once this round was fired from the cannon, the canister would break apart and the individual balls would be released, causing extensive casualties to an approaching enemy force. Might this item have been used in a game?

A Better Understanding of Life at the Fort

This small inventory of material culture that was found behind the wall in the Enlisted Men's Barracks gives us glimpses of life during the Civil War. The sardine can reminds us that, even during the Civil War, international trade with European countries continued, both in foodstuffs and in munitions.

The discarded bits of leather found in the Enlisted Men's Barracks suggest much in terms of social and economic relations among the populations at the fort. Enlisted men may have been able to maintain social contact with women, despite orders against housing families of enlisted men. Military service may have permitted other sources of income, such as shoe cobbling.

The fragments of women's shoes also remind us of the strides women have made in attaining parity with men in military service. Within the walls of Fort Washington, women went from being associated with the domestic households of officers, to serving in the military in restricted capacities with limited benefits, to being fully integrated in military service with benefits commensurate with men.



Portrait on attic ceiling of Fort Washington barracks.



Checkerboard found between wall studs.

While it is risky to make conclusions based on these few items, they do raise questions whose answers must wait for further research. More detailed study will, no doubt, provide further avenues for contemplation.

By Mike Antonioni, Park Curator, National Capital Parks-East, Resource Management Division

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