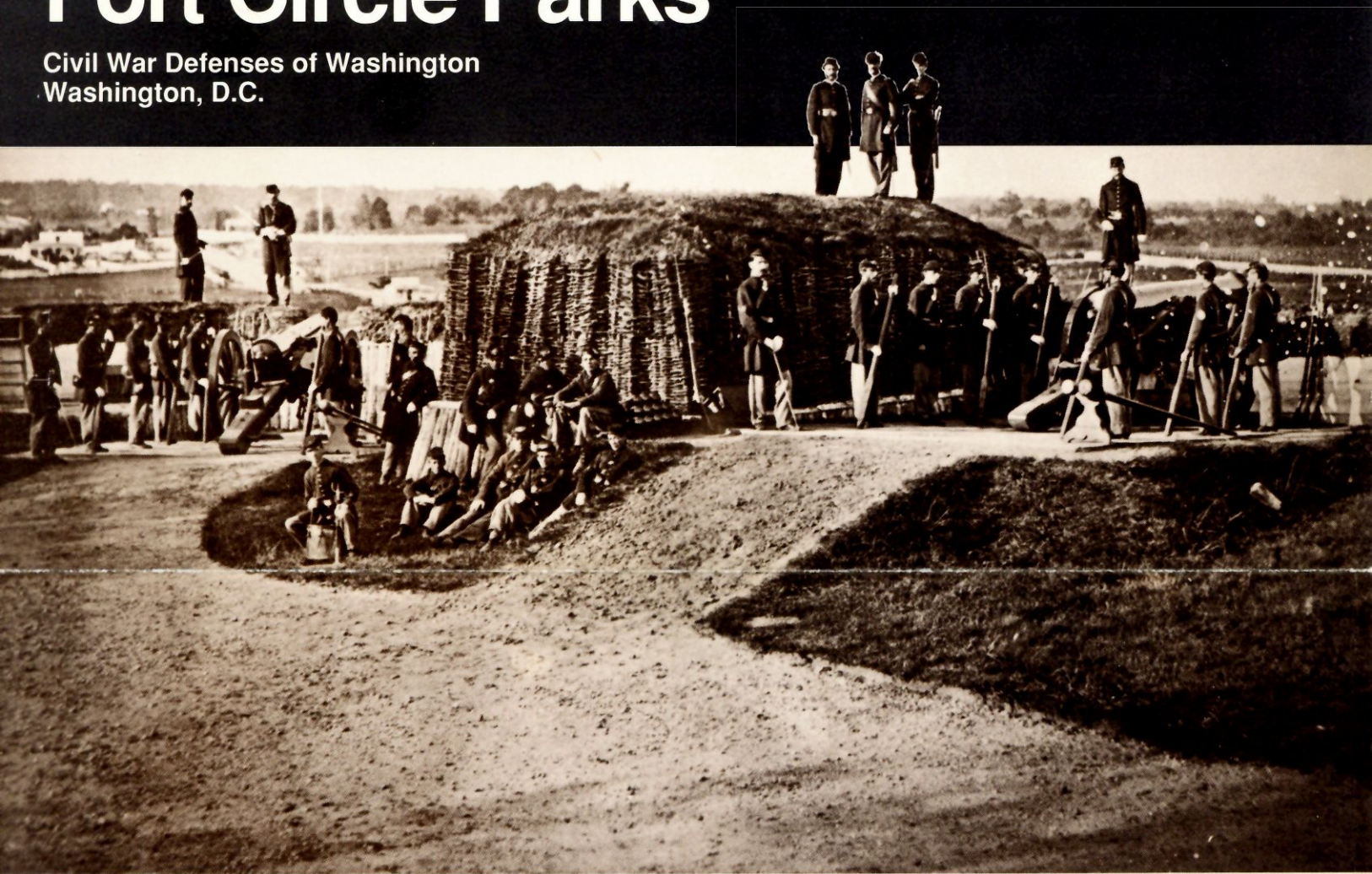


Fort Circle Parks

Civil War Defenses of Washington
Washington, D.C.



Soldiers of the 3d Massachusetts guard Fort Stevens, August 1865. Five miles from the capital, this earthen stronghold bore the brunt of the only Confederate attack on the city.

With the outbreak of the Civil War, Washington turned into the training ground, arsenal, supply depot, and nerve center for the Union cause. Newly formed regiments encamped in every quarter, and streets reverberated under the wheels of cannon. Cattle for meat grazed on the Mall; sacks of flour, stacked against siege, surrounded the U.S. Treasury. To protect the city and vital supply routes from enemy hands, Union armies built a ring of earthen fortifications.

The remains of those fortifications preserved by the National Park Service are now known collectively as the Fort Circle Parks. When constructed in the 1860s, they were on the city's edge. Urban sprawl has absorbed most of the sites, but names of playgrounds, parks, and other places throughout the area have origins in the Civil War fortifications. This is the story of how the forts were built and what remains of Washington's historic defenses.

Capital Without Defenses

In spring 1861 the city lay open to attack by states that withdrew from the Union. Virginia just across the Potomac seceded in April. Maryland, a slave state, had many southern sympathizers. They answered President Lincoln's call for volunteers by burning bridges and tearing up tracks to prevent Union soldiers from reaching the capital. In spite of hostile acts, enough regiments arrived to seize and fortify footholds across the river in Virginia, occupying points from below Alexandria to hills above Chain Bridge, including the Arlington plantation of the Robert E. Lee family. This move placed offices of the federal government beyond the reach of Confederate cannons.

When the Civil War began, only one fortification existed for the capital's defense: outmoded Fort Washington, nearly 12 miles down the Potomac, built to guard against enemy ships following the War of 1812. It took the rout of federal forces at Manassas in July 1861 to reveal how truly vulnerable the city was. Taking command of and reorganizing the Army of the Potomac, Maj. Gen. George B. McClellan appointed Major

(later bvt. major general) John G. Barnard of the Corps of Engineers to build many new forts.

Selecting sites a few miles outside the city limits, Barnard's engineers picked high points that overlooked major turnpikes, railroads, and shipping lanes. Natural fords upriver from the city, allowing the enemy to cross the Potomac during low water, spurred the building of more forts and batteries. Rifle pits filled in the gaps. By spring 1865, the defense system totaled 68 forts and 93 batteries with 807 cannons and 98 mortars in place. Twenty miles of rifle trenches flanked the bristling strongholds, joined by more than 30 miles of military roads over which companies of soldiers and guns could move as reinforcements. Washington had become the most heavily fortified city in the world.

From Fields to Forts

Fort construction plans followed the standard treatise on field fortifications, though no two forts were exactly alike. Laborers piled up earthworks so that parapets 12- to 18-feet thick faced exposed fronts. Within the ramparts, field and siege guns were mounted on platforms to lay down a wide angle of

fire. Outside the earthworks, a steep slope led down to a dry moat. Beyond this ditch, felled trees with sharpened branches pointing outward (called an abatis) ringed the fort. Work parties scalped all brush and trees in front of the fort for up to two miles, leaving no cover.

Inside the fort a rounded structure of heavy timbers heaped with 10 or more feet of rammed earth formed the magazine for storing ammunition and kegs of gunpowder. The bombproof, a longer mound, sheltered gun crews and officers. Often the bombproof's dirt covering was notched to make a bench from which riflemen could fire. Every fort had a well or spring for clean water and a flagstaff to fly the Union colors. The entrance was called the sally port.

The effort to protect the capital continued throughout the war. At first companies of soldiers worked on the defenses before being called to drill and prepare for battle. Later hired laborers—carpenters, teamsters, blacksmiths, and others made up work crews. Of the thousands of contrabands—fugitives from slavery—that took refuge in the city, hundreds labored on fortifications and served the garrisons. "None need be idle," reported the *Anglo-African* newspaper.

Life for enlisted men in the forts began at dawn. Drill, repairs, duties, parades, and inspection consumed the day. "The time passed pleasantly enough," wrote one soldier, spared from hardships in the field.

Defenses Challenged

Only once were Washington's defenses tested, in July 1864 during Confederate General Jubal Early's daring raid. Today, a half-mile north of Fort Stevens on Georgia Avenue (the Seventh Street Road that carried Early's men to the assault), Battleground National Cemetery, one of the nation's smallest Civil War cemeteries, has 41 headstones for victims of action near the fort. Regimental memorials honor the soldiers from New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and other northern states who fell on July 11 and 12, fighting to save the capital "in the presence of President Lincoln."

Battle of Fort Stevens

Today visitors to Fort Stevens can stand where President Abraham Lincoln, surveying the field of battle, came under enemy fire in 1864.

Located on the northern periphery of the capital's defenses, Fort Stevens commanded the turnpike from Silver Spring to Washington, five miles away. Confederate Lt. Gen. Jubal A. Early chose this route for a bold attack on the capital. But while northern troops delayed the rebels in the costly Battle of Monocacy near Frederick, Maryland, Union reinforcements hurried to Fort Stevens. Forts Slocum, Totten, and DeRussy joined in the defense of Fort Stevens on July 11 and 12, firing on the advancing enemy troops. Early retreated across the Potomac, ending the only Confederate action against Washington.



