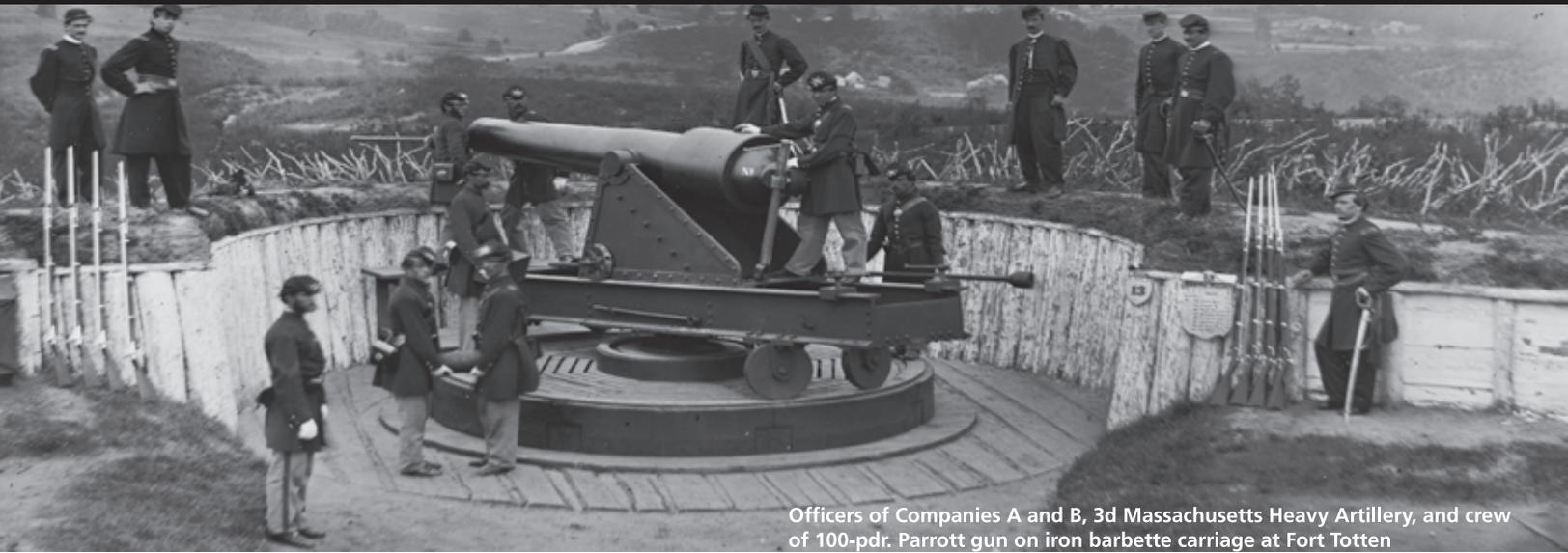


Civil War Defenses of Washington

Washington, D.C.
Virginia
Maryland



Officers of Companies A and B, 3d Massachusetts Heavy Artillery, and crew of 100-pdr. Parrott gun on iron barbette carriage at Fort Totten

A Circle of Forts

Throughout the modern sprawling metropolis of Washington, DC lay distant reminders of a time when the nation's capital feared attack by fellow Americans. These are the Civil War defenses of Washington. During the time of the Civil War, these bastions of freedom bustled with tens of thousands of soldiers who swore to protect liberty and the Capital City at all costs. Today, urban encroachment and development have absorbed a portion of these sites but the names of these forts are not forgotten nor have the stories of bravery and sacrifice of those who defended Washington during this tumultuous period in American history been lost to time. With the majority of the existing lands under the stewardship of the National Park Service, they are known collectively as the "Fort Circle Parks." Other sites not under National Park Service jurisdiction are protected by the City of Alexandria, Fairfax and Arlington County, Virginia, Montgomery County, Maryland, District of Columbia, or are on private lands.

With the outbreak of the Civil War, Washington D.C. 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 on the city's edge.

The Nations Capital Without Defenses

In Spring 1861 Washington, D.C. lay open to attack by Confederate forces. Virginia, just across the Potomac River from the city, 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 railroad 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 route 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 a system of new forts.

Selecting sites a few miles outside the heart of the city, 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 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.



Major John G. Barnard

From Forest to Forts

The lands where the forts were constructed were mostly private lands that were confiscated because of the high ground advantage. Fort construction plans followed the standard treatise on field fortifications, though no two forts were exactly alike. Laborers piled up earthworks so that parapet 12- to 18-foot 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. Before being called to drill and prepare for battle, soldiers worked on the construction on the defenses of the city. In addition, conscripted slaves, carpenters, teamsters, blacksmiths, and others were utilized to ensure that the defenses of Washington would be built quickly to safeguard Washington, DC from a possible Confederate invasion. Of the thousands of contraband (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.



Detachment of Company K, 3d Mass. Heavy Artillery, by guns of Ft. Stevens

Defenses Challenged

After four years of constant construction, drill and solemn vigilance, the defenses were finally tested in July 1864 when Confederate General Jubal Anderson Early led approx. 15,000 troops on an assault on the nation's capital. Known as the Battle of Fort Stevens (where the majority of fighting took place) the measure of the forts were tested and proved strong enough to defend Washington, DC.

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."

War Ends

At war's end in 1865, the forts and batteries were dismantled, the lumber and other materials sold at auction and the land for the most part returned to pre-war owners. Fort Reno was designated a Freedman's village. Fort Foote, an active army post until it was decommissioned in 1878, was the last of the city's Civil War defenses to close.

Although a majority of these honored guardians of the Capital City are forever lost to time and development, a handful of these fortifications and lands still remain to tell of the time when Washington, DC prepared for war. Several of these sites, like Fort DeRussy and Fort Totten, remain as they were when the forts were abandoned. These forts, and many others, now silently rest in the pristine hillsides and forests that surround Washington, DC. Some forts, like Fort Stevens and Fort Ward are partial reconstructions whereas Fort Foote has been stabilized and rearmed. Fort Washington, the oldest defender of the city, mostly appears as it did during the time of the Civil War. While venturing out to these sites, one will find that most of these sites have interpretive markers to guide one down the path of history. Others may require some sleuthing to locate and recognize them for what they are. A detailed map of the city will aid in the search. Autumn through early spring offer the best conditions for tracing the outlines of eroded earthworks. Once used for protecting Washington from possible attack, the Civil War defenses of Washington now protect the memory of when brave men vowed to defend Washington, DC and the causes of liberty and freedom at any price.

