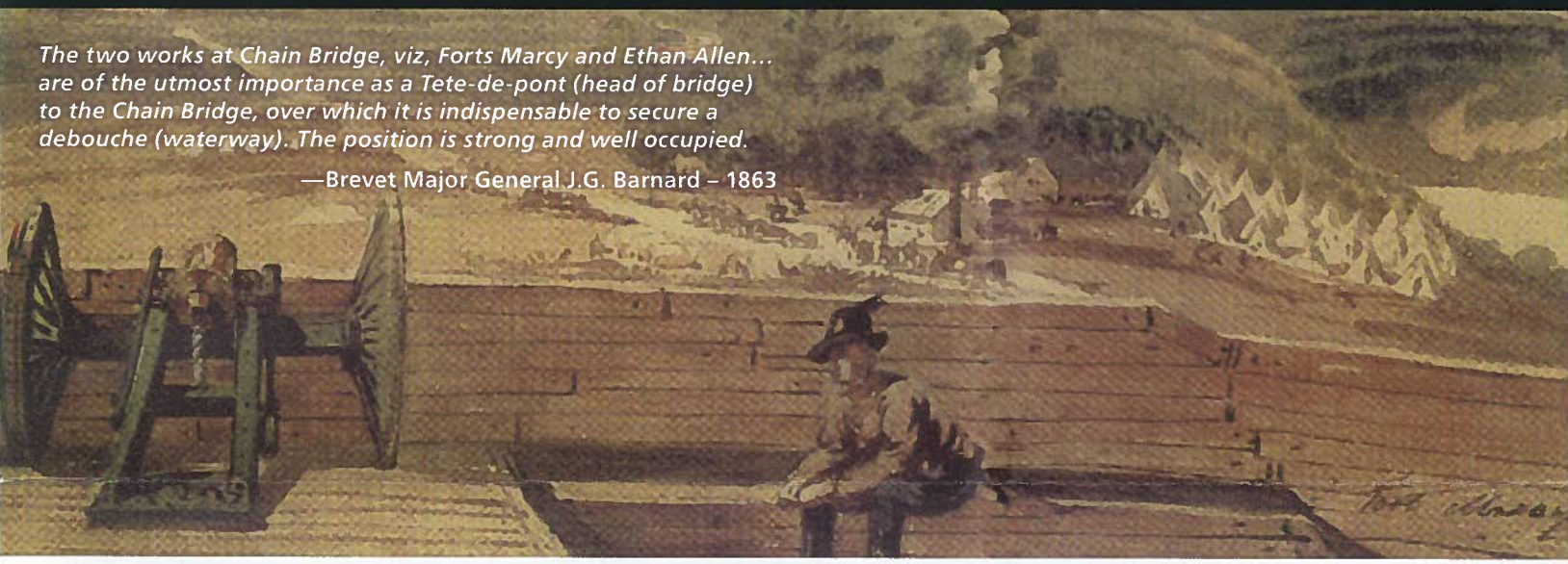
Fort Marcy

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

George Washington Memorial Parkway



The two works at Chain Bridge, viz, Forts Marcy and Ethan Allen... are of the utmost importance as a Tete-de-pont (head of bridge) to the Chain Bridge, over which it is indispensable to secure a debouche (waterway). The position is strong and well occupied.

—Brevet Major General J.G. Barnard – 1863

Shots Fired!

Above: A Union soldier is seated on the ramparts of Fort Marcy overlooking Georgetown & Leesburg Turnpike (Chain Bridge Road).

Watercolor by Prince de Joinville

What was to become the bloodiest war ever fought on American soil would have far-reaching effects and an immediate impact on the capital city of Washington, D.C. The American Civil War began on April 12, 1861, with a Confederate attack on Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor, South Carolina. The years leading up to these opening shots of the Civil War were marked by a series of escalating crises with unsuccessful compromises.

Political battles centered on protecting regional economic interests. States' rights versus federal authority were at the heart of the debate, though slavery remained an underlying issue. Arguments focused on the new western territories: Free or slave states? The South worried that the federal government could outlaw slavery in states where slavery formed the basis of the economy.

The new Republican Party stood for non-expansion of slavery, not for its abolition; southerners who advocated states' rights saw this as a serious threat to their standard of living. As these issues brought the nation to war, the United States government realized the capital city was in a perilous position.

In Defense of Washington

The vulnerability of Washington, D.C., became a grave concern for residents, military leaders and politicians as the conflict escalated. The heart of the Confederacy lay across the Potomac River in Virginia. The state of Maryland – a Union slave state with many southern sympathizers – was located to the north.

Surrounded by unfriendly territory, with only one fort (Fort Washington in Maryland) in operation at the beginning of the Civil War, the Nation's capital was not prepared for direct military attack. This led to a massive construction effort to establish a defensive ring of forts around the city. The federal government spent $1.4 million (which is equivalent to more than $31.5 million today) to build and maintain the system of fortifications from 1861-65. By Spring 1865, this effort made Washington, D.C., one of the most heavily fortified cities in the world, with a circle of 8 major enclosed forts and 93 batteries (or artillery positions consisting of one to six cannons each).

Development of Fort Marcy

One of the forts defending the city against enemy forces became known as Fort Marcy. Located on a ridge in Virginia, Fort Marcy was strategically placed near the Leesburg Turnpike and Chain Bridge, a key crossing over the Potomac River. The Union deemed this bridgehead vital to furthering their activities in northern Virginia and worthy of protection.

In September 1861, Brigadier General William F. "Baldy" Smith moved a brigade of Union troops (several thousand soldiers) near Chain Bridge and adjacent to Pimmit Run. They camped in a woods owned by local businessman Gilbert Vanderwerken.

Nearly 13,000 acres of Vanderwerken's land fell victim to both armies. The Confederates plundered his plantation, Falls Grove, and took all the horses, wagons and feed. Then the Union Army moved onto his land to build Fort Marcy and Fort Ethan Allen. The soldiers cleared trees from the area and built batteries and trenches as the main defense for the bridge.

Construction and Maintenance

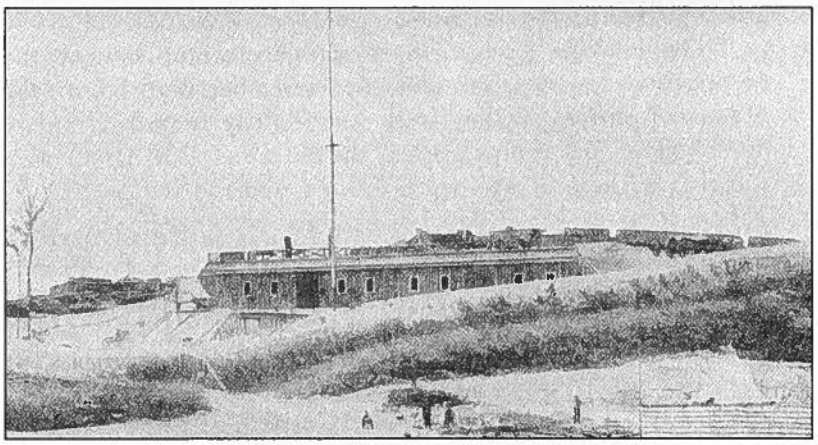
General McClellan selected the title of the fort in honor of Brigadier General Randolph Barnes Marcy, his chief of staff and father-in-law. Initially called "Fort Baldy Smith," the site received its new name by General Order #18 on September 30, 1861.

Fort Marcy was built on a hillside. Soldiers labored to move tons of earth to create ramparts (walls) and parapets (banks of dirt piled along the edges of a military trench for protection from enemy fire) that were 12-18 feet thick. In addition, the soldiers dug rifle pits and trenches. These "earthworks" created a formidable defensive outpost, with a perimeter of 736 yards and emplacements (locations) for 18 field guns. Workers continued to clear the surrounding wooded area in order to maintain high visibility toward Chain Bridge and Leesburg Pike.

In 1862, the fort needed renovation due to erosion caused by frost and rain. Changes included improved embrasures (wall openings for firing cannon), bombproofs (structures designed to resist the impact and explosions of shells), and reconstructed magazines (for storing ammunition and kegs of gunpowder). The perimeter of Fort Marcy was decreased to 338 yards but still maintained 18 field guns.

Fort Marcy also underwent reinforcement due to an inquiry by General McClellan as to its readiness. In August 1862, Confederate General Robert E. Lee had amassed forces near Manassas Junction and there was great concern about an attack on the capital. Lee waged a three-day offensive campaign against the Union that resulted in an overwhelming victory for the Confederacy. He then marched his troops, consisting of approximately 45,000 soldiers, toward Washington, D.C.

The Confederate Army made this move in an effort to cause panic among the citizens of Washington. General Lee was well aware that the size of the Union forces (73,000 soldiers), combined with the shield the forts provided, posed a respectable barrier to the capture of the capital city. Lee's real intention was to rid Virginia of Union troops by continuing his thrust northward into Maryland.



Right: Fort Marcy's bombproof (bomb shelter) and sallyport (fort entrance) as seen from the soldiers' camp across the turnpike.

Review of Reviews, 1911

Fort Marcy – Then and Now

Fort Marcy, while advantageously located at a major crossing of the Potomac River, saw very little action. However, the fort was often in "alert" status. Life at the fort consisted of drills, repairs, duties, parades and mud. The routine began with reveille at day break, lunch at noon and lights out by 9 p.m. each day. Saturday was a regular work day, with Sunday open as free time – after morning inspection.

Soldiers who were stationed at Fort Marcy often wrote home regarding fort life:

On last Sunday Co's A & B were detailed for picket duty about a mile from camp. Co. A (Capt. Porter's) captured a rebel spy endeavoring to creep through to the lines. He had a rebel uniform on under his other clothes. He was sent to a fort down below our camp.

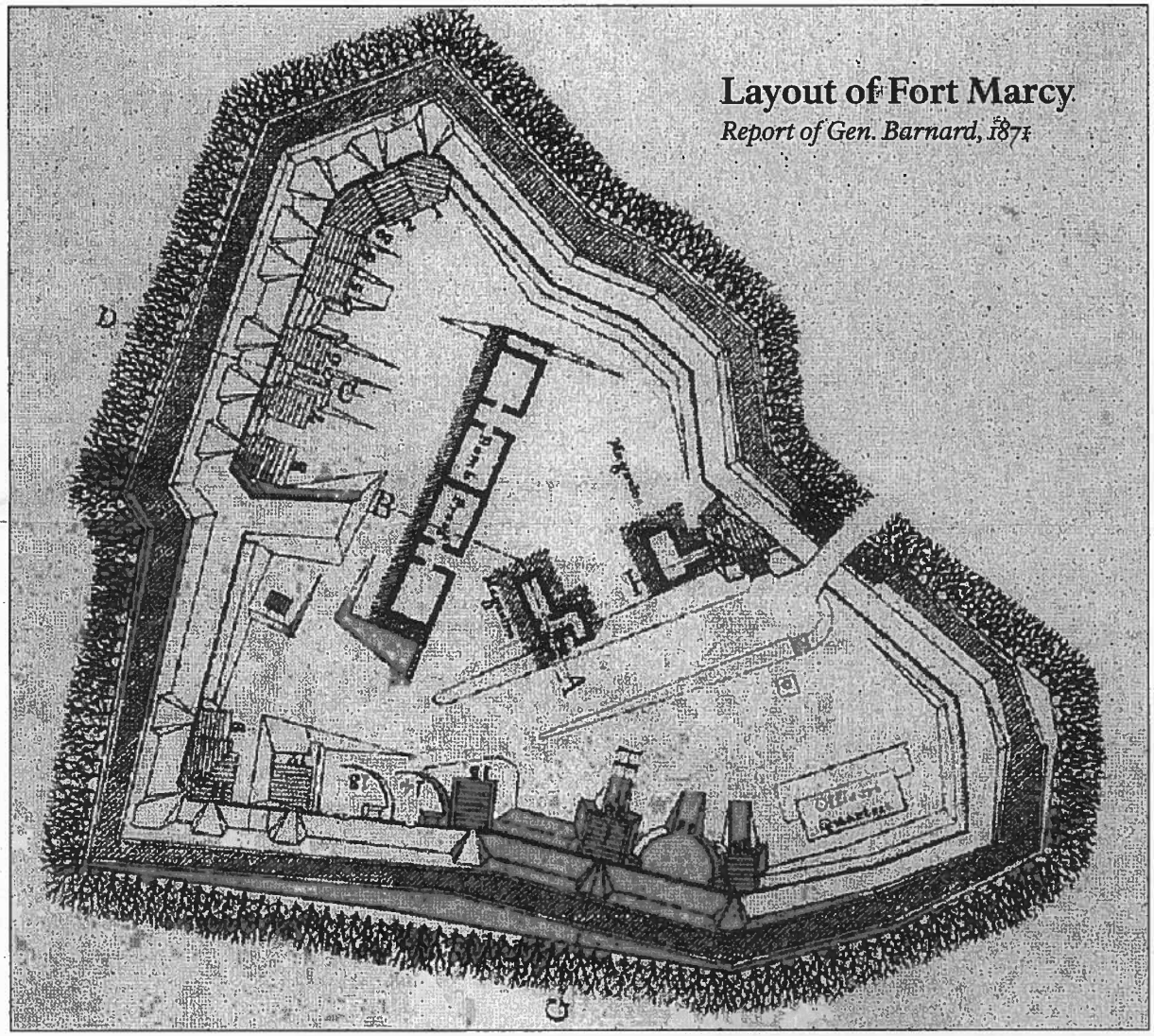
—Private Keller Bobb, Co F, 130th Penn. Vols., September 2, 1862. (Soldier died of wounds received at Fredericksburg, January 21, 1863.)

Our duties are not very heavy, we are at present guarding Chain Bridge and the fort. Company B of our Regiment are stationed here with us our Company Furnish about Twenty men per day for Guard duty we have plenty of Drill where the weather Permits but Soldiering at the Best is not varry laborious Business.

—An unidentified New York soldier, December 7, 1862.

When the war ended in May 1865, Washington, D.C., began to relax its defenses. Fort Marcy was dismantled and the land was returned to its owner. The land remained in the Vanderwerken family until after World War II, when the DeLashmutt family purchased the property.

Fort Marcy – the strategically-placed but seldom-tested field fortification – could have gone the way of many of the Circle Forts in the Washington, D.C. area – obliterated by time and progress. However,



Layout of Fort Marcy
Report of Gen. Barnard, 1871

strong public and governmental interest in the centennial of the Civil War and in preservation of historic places around the Nation's capital saved Fort Marcy from such a fate. On May 7, 1959, Anna DeLashmutt deeded Fort Marcy to the federal government. With its history of conflict and peaceful natural setting, Fort Marcy opened as a public park in 1963.

Today, the National Park Service preserves the fort that valiantly stood ready to protect Washington, D.C., during a very dark time in the nation's history. Wander through the fort and try to imagine the struggles that soldiers and the nation faced during the War Between the States.

PRESERVE, PROTECT, AND ENJOY!

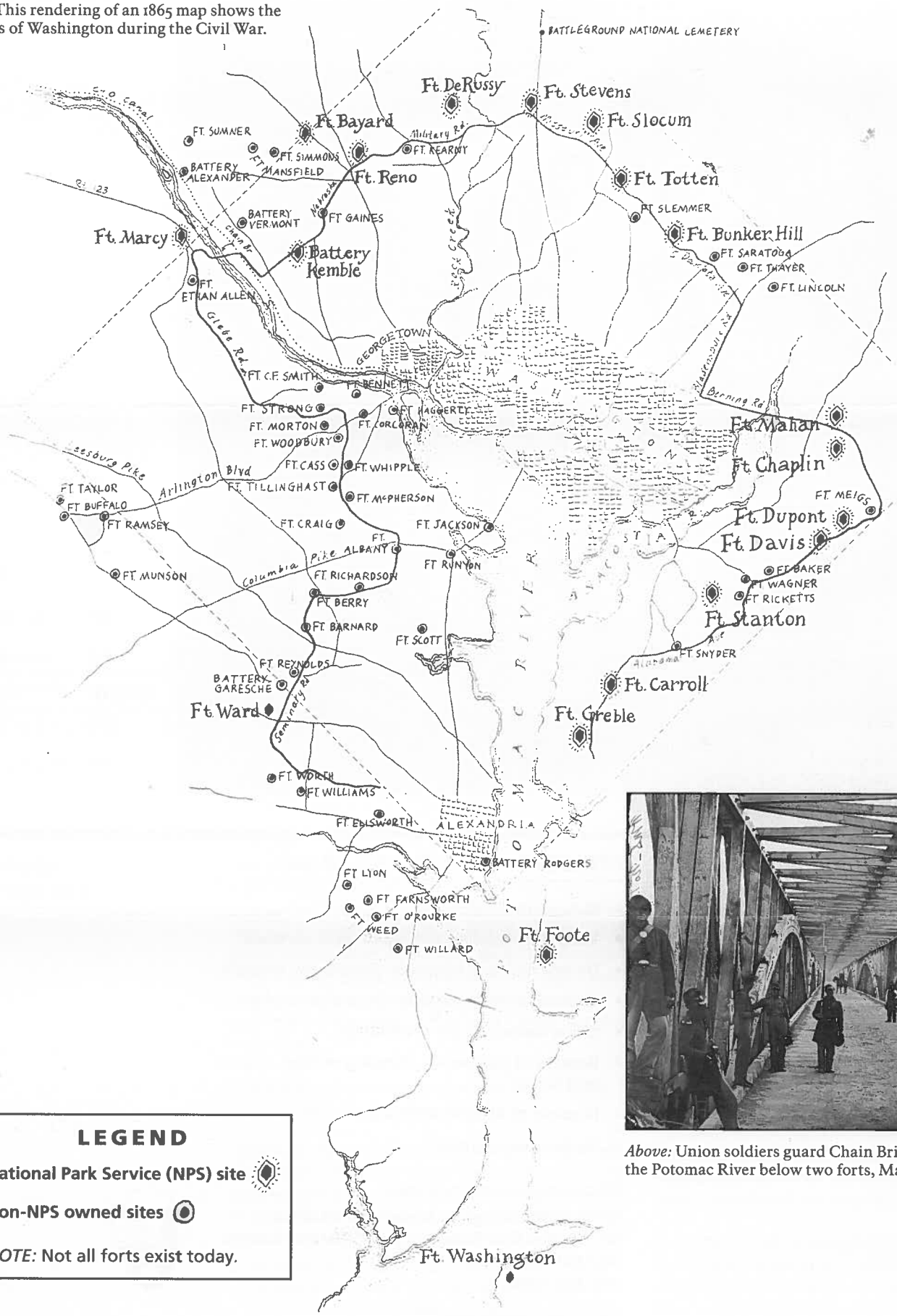
- **Stay on marked trails.**
- **Keep pets leashed and clean up after them.**
- **Do not pick any plants or disturb any animals.**
- **Collection of artifacts or relics is prohibited.**
- **Metal detectors are prohibited.**
- **Beware of poison ivy, stinging nettles, snakes and ticks.**
- **Dispose of litter in trash cans.**
- **No bicycles allowed.**

For more information contact:

George Washington Memorial Parkway
c/o Turkey Run Park, Virginia District Ranger
McLean, VA 22101
703-289-2500

www.nps.gov/gwmp

Below: This rendering of an 1865 map shows the defenses of Washington during the Civil War.



Above: Union soldiers guard Chain Bridge, which spanned the Potomac River below two forts, Marcy and Ethan Allen.

LEGEND

National Park Service (NPS) site

Non-NPS owned sites

NOTE: Not all forts exist today.