



Foundation Document Overview

Civil War Defenses of Washington

District of Columbia / Maryland



Contact Information

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Purpose



THE CIVIL WAR DEFENSES OF WASHINGTON protects and interprets the remnants of historic Civil War forts while preserving a corridor of forest and natural scenery as part of a comprehensive system of parks for preservation of substantial tracts of forests, protection of source water, and recreation in and around the nation's capital.



Significance

Significance statements express why Civil War Defenses of Washington resources and values are important enough to merit national park unit designation. Statements of significance describe why an area is important within a global, national, regional, and systemwide context. These statements are linked to the purpose of the park unit, and are supported by data, research, and consensus. Significance statements describe the distinctive nature of the park and inform management decisions, focusing efforts on preserving and protecting the most important resources and values of the park unit.

- The scale, inventive design, and speed of construction of the Civil War Defenses of Washington resulted in a system of forts, batteries, and rifle trenches that effectively deterred the invasion of the nation's capital by the Confederate Army during the Civil War, and are a tangible reminder of the capital city's rich Civil War history.
- The defensive position of the forts on hills surrounding the city provides an outstanding opportunity to explore and understand the strategic interaction between the environment and cultural history.
- The significant natural features and processes preserved by the Civil War Defenses of Washington provide viable corridors for both plant and wildlife diversity and exceptional recreational opportunities, which help create a healthier natural and human environment in the nation's capital.
- The Civil War Defenses of Washington were havens of safety for the many contrabands and formerly enslaved Africans who fled to Washington during the Civil War and influenced African American settlement patterns in the nation's capital. ("Contraband" is a historical term that refers to individuals who escaped slavery and sought refuge behind Union lines).
- The McMillan Commission's 1902 plan, as realized when the acquisition of fort sites began in the 1920s, represented visionary urban planning efforts for public recreation and preserved a scenic backdrop for the nation's capital.
- The green space and extensive trail network protected by the Civil War Defenses of Washington help to shape, strengthen, and provide identity for communities in the city through recreation, cultural events, and neighborhood activities.

Fundamental Resources and Values

Fundamental resources and values are those features, systems, processes, experiences, stories, scenes, sounds, smells, or other attributes determined to merit primary consideration during planning and management processes because they are essential to achieving the purpose of the park and maintaining its significance.

- **The Fortifications**
- **The Natural and Scenic Features of the Green Space Corridor**
- **Recreational Opportunities**
- **Cultural Landscapes**
- **Archeological Resources**



Interpretive Themes

Interpretive themes are often described as the key stories or concepts that visitors should understand after visiting a park—they define the most important ideas or concepts communicated to visitors about a park unit. Themes are derived from—and should reflect—park purpose, significance, resources, and values. The set of interpretive themes is complete when it provides the structure necessary for park staff to develop opportunities for visitors to explore and relate to all of the park significances and fundamental resources and values.

- The Civil War Defenses of Washington were established as a corridor of forest and natural scenery as part of a comprehensive system of parks for recreation, preservation of substantial tracts of forests, and protection of source water in and around the nation's capital.
- In the nation's capital, tense with the daily presence of war, the Civil War Defenses of Washington effectively deterred the advance of the Confederate Army and the invasion of the capital, and served as a proving ground for military innovation.
- In transforming themselves from enslaved to emancipated, contrabands sought the freedom and security of the Civil War Defenses of Washington. They contributed to the construction of the defenses of Washington, founded many of Washington's historically African American communities, inspired their own and future generations, and helped to redefine the citizenry of the United States.
- The preservation of the Civil War Defenses of Washington created significant natural corridors that provide exceptional views of the city, offer opportunities to learn about nature in an urban setting, support species and habitat diversity, and enhance environmental quality by contributing to stormwater runoff control, mitigating the effects of urban heat islands, and providing tree canopies for shade and cleaner air.
- The CWDW sites represent visionary urban planning efforts at the turn of the 20th century aimed at providing recreational opportunities through public parks, preserving significant historical and natural resources, and using the parkway concept to link preserved public spaces at the advent of motorized travel.
- The Civilian Conservation Corps operated locally out of Fort Dupont and completed several important projects throughout the Civil War Defenses of Washington, working to rebuild the nation during the Great Depression.

Description

Of the surviving features of the system of defenses termed the Civil War Defenses of Washington (CWDW), National Capital Parks—East administers nine: Forts Mahan, Chaplin, Dupont, Davis, Stanton, Ricketts, Greble, and Foote, and Battery Carroll, in addition to the adjacent parkland and connecting park corridors, including Shepherd Parkway. The other defense sites administered by the National Park Service are part of the George Washington Memorial Parkway and Rock Creek Park. These sites came under the jurisdiction of the National Park Service under the authority of Public Law 71-284, the Capper-Cramton Act. Most of the forts had previously been under federal ownership, and during the first half of the 20th century, jurisdiction passed through several governing bodies within the federal government until they came to the National Park Service.

The Civil War Defenses of Washington were constructed as a circle of fortifications on the high ground surrounding Washington, DC, to protect the city during the Civil War. The city had not been threatened militarily since the War of 1812, and was initially undefended against Confederate incursion as the Civil War began in 1861. Outside the city's urban core was a rural landscape consisting of larger estates and family farms, crossroads communities, turnpikes and farm lanes, and, critically, the topographic high ground. This dispersed, open rural environment was the landscape context for the engineered construction of the Civil War Defenses of Washington between 1862 and 1865.

By 1864, Washington had become one of the most fortified cities in the world, with an encircling array of forts, batteries, and military roads. At the war's end, it was reported that the defenses of Washington included 68 enclosed forts and batteries, emplacements for 1,120 guns (with 807 guns and 98 mortars actually mounted), 93 unarmed batteries with 401 emplacements for field-guns, 20 miles of rifle trenches, three blockhouses, and 32 miles of military roads linking the defenses.

Beginning as early as 1872, several plans called for creating a continuous thread of public parks surrounding the city where the defenses had once kept watch. The 1902 McMillan Commission report was a comprehensive planning document that called for the improvement of DC parks, including linking the city's Civil War fort-parks via a grand drive. Government acquisition of the Civil War defenses began between the establishment of Fort Dupont in 1916 and the work relief programs of the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) in the 1930s, providing an impetus for park design and reconstruction efforts at sites such as Fort Stevens, Fort Stanton, Bunker Hill, and others. Fort Foote remained in military use until the early 20th century. Today, each of the historic fort sites plays an important role in its local community, both as an area for recreation and as a place to learn about the history of the Civil War in Washington, DC.

