

Fort Washington

Official Map and Guide

Fort Washington Park
Maryland

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



Robert Lautman

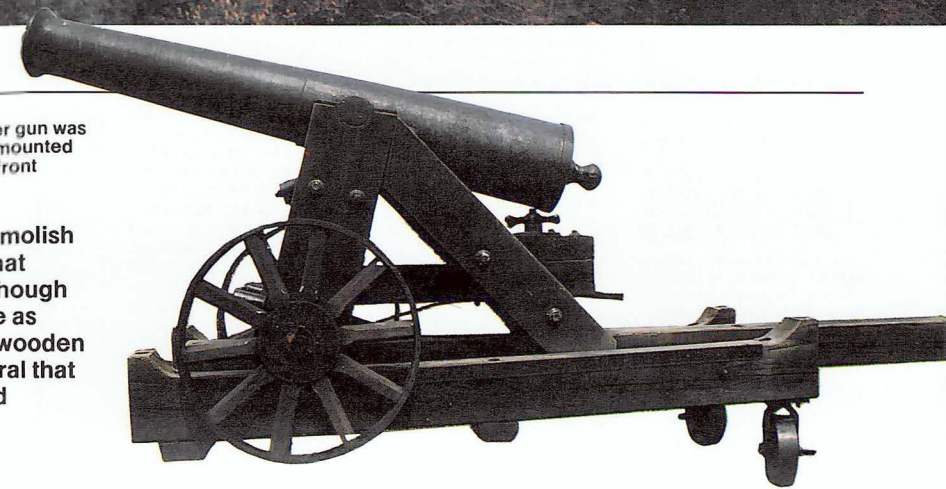
Fortification for a Capital

Fort Washington is the story of changing military strategy, of changing technology, and of a rapidly growing and maturing nation. It is the accumulation of events and ideas and the physical remains of several forts rather than of one climatic act or of one structure. It thereby illustrates a significant portion—from 1808 to 1922—of American history and the continuing debate about how best to defend the United States. The first fort on this location was one element in a system, based on 18th-century French ideas of military architecture and strategy, to protect the eastern seacoast. The British attack on and subse-

quent burning of Washington powerfully showed that a new defensive plan was needed. In the wake of the War of 1812, the Fort Washington that we know today began to take form. Many factors affected the fort over the years, not the least of which were a temperamental architect—Pierre L'Enfant—and the periodic unavailability of funds. Like its predecessor, this fort was to be part of a system that would defend the east coast, not just Washington, from naval attack. During the Civil War the development of armored ships and rifled cannon altered the nature of warfare. Armored ships could approach nearer than wooden

ships had been able to and could use rifled cannon to demolish brick fortifications. The answer was concrete batteries that housed larger rifled cannon with a greater range. Even though the batteries were located away from the river, they were as effective as the earlier brick structure had been against wooden ships. Fort Washington is not just one structure but several that were built to meet the changing demands of strategy and technology.

This 24-pounder gun was one of several mounted in 1861 on the front curtain.



What's Going On

The life of a Civil War-era soldier is portrayed through Fort Washington's many living history programs. On weekends park interpreters, dressed in authentic U.S. Army uniforms, recreate the life of a 19th-century military garrison. They load and fire muzzle-loading weapons and cannon, talk about the everyday life

of enlisted men and officers in their respective quarters on the parade grounds, and conduct the ceremonies of military life. They also discuss the difference between smooth-bore and rifled artillery and explain the significance that rifled artillery had for Fort Washington. These living history programs take place only at



Visitor center

specific times; for a schedule of events call 301-763-4600.

Picnicking and hiking are also popular activities in the park, and you may fish along the Potomac River. Call the park about reserving picnic areas in advance.

Fort Washington is a unit of the National Park System, which consists of more than 360 parks rep-

resenting important examples of our country's natural and cultural inheritance. For more information write: Superintendent, Fort Washington Park, c/o NCP-East, 1900 Anacostia Drive SE, Washington, DC 20020-6722; or call 301-763-4600.

Getting There

Fort Washington lies on the Maryland shore of the Potomac River, south of Washington, D.C. From I-95, the Capital Beltway, follow the signs for Md. 210 Indian Head Highway. Take exit 3 and go south on Indian Head Highway. Turn right onto Fort Washington Road to the park.

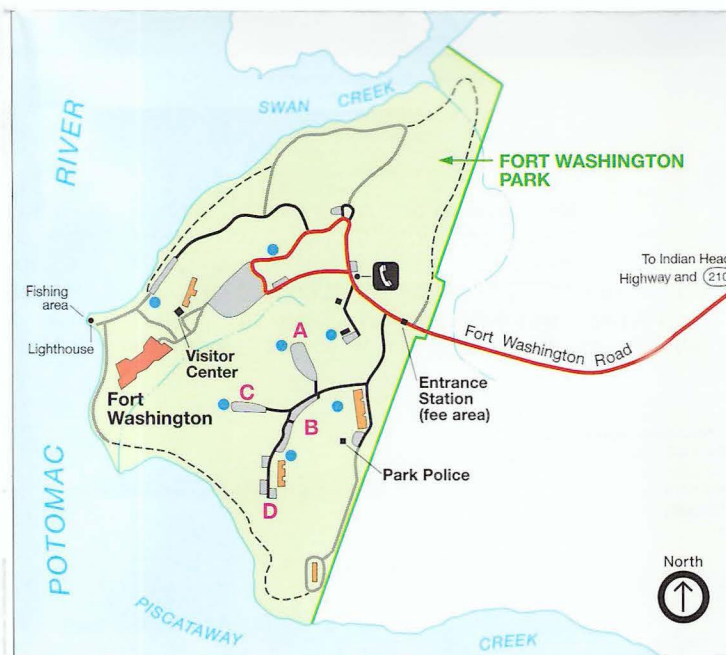
The Visitor Center has exhibits and an audiovisual program about the park. A sales counter offers materials on Fort Washington and the National Capital area. The visitor center, restrooms, picnic areas, and the fort are accessible for persons with disabilities.

The park is open every day; the fort and visitor center are open daily except January 1 and December 25. A fee is charged from March through mid-November for each vehicle entering the park.

MAP LEGEND:

- Parking lot (accessible)
- Service road (motor vehicles prohibited)
- Foot trail
- Endicott battery
- Telephone
- Reserved picnic area
- Restrooms

0 0.3 Kilometer
0 0.3 Mile



Safety

Fort Washington is a 19th-century fortification with some inherent dangers. By maintaining the authenticity of the fort, some of these dangers remain. Please stay off the parapet and watch your children. Do not climb on any part of the fort or on the batteries built around the turn of the century; some of these batteries may be unstable. *Make sure that pets are on a leash and under control at all times. *Leave plants and native wildflowers for others to enjoy as much as you do. *Report any accidents to a park ranger or to the U.S. park police as soon as you can. *Be on the watch for poison ivy. Remember the rhyme: "Leaflets three, let them be."

From Fort to Park



In 1872 the U.S. Army turned over control of Fort Washington to the Army engineers who then constructed new gun positions. In 1896 work on eight concrete batteries began near the old fort, and they were outfitted with Endicott-era guns: 10-inch rifles on disappearing carriages, 12-inch mortar batteries, and 4-inch rifles. Land was purchased and similar installations were built directly across the Potomac.

In 1921, after the post was no longer needed, it became the headquarters of the 12th infantry. During World War II the Adjutant General's Officer Candidate School was based here. In 1946 the fort was deactivated and became a unit of the National Park System so that the historic fabric of the fort itself could be preserved and recreational facilities could be provided.



Living history demonstration

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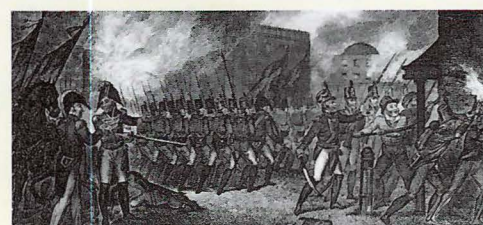
1808

The Treaty of Paris, which ended the American Revolution and created the United States, did not settle all problems between the former colony and Great Britain. Slowly, tensions mounted, and as they did, belief in the inevitability of war grew. To protect the national capital, the United States began work on Fort Warburton (right) in 1808, and by December 1, 1809, it was finished. Sited on the Maryland shore of the Potomac River across and upriver from Mount Vernon, as suggested in the 1790s by George Washington, the installation commanded the Potomac. Perpendicular earthen walls stood 14 feet above the bottom of the ditch that surrounded the river side of the fort. A tower facing the river contained six cannon. Fort Warburton stood only five years. On Au-



gust 19, 1814, British forces landed at Benedict, Md., on the Patuxent River and marched overland to Washington, D.C., routing an American force at Bladensburg and entering the defenseless city, burning the Capitol, the White House, and other public buildings (above, right). The next day British warships sailed up the Potomac headed for Alexandria. In the face of certain destruction of the fort, Capt. Samuel Dyson chose to evacuate his men and

British Advance on Washington, 1814



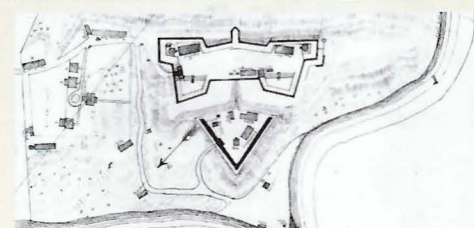
used the powder to blow up the fort so that it could not fall into British hands.

Within less than a month of its demolition, Fort Warburton began to rise from its own ashes. The project was directed by acting Secretary of War James Monroe, who hired Pierre Charles L'Enfant, the French engineer who had drawn up the plans for Washington, D.C. As work was progressing, however, the threat was diminishing. Concern about the defenses of Washing-

ton had lessened considerably by the time news reached Washington that a peace treaty had been signed in Ghent, Belgium, on December 24, 1814, and that American troops had handily defeated the British at the Battle of New Orleans, January 8, 1815.

1815

Even before the Treaty of Ghent, Monroe had begun to rein in L'Enfant. In November 1814 he questioned L'Enfant's removal of some of the old fort and asked for greater economy. L'Enfant was told to submit reports on the work in progress and to prepare detailed plans of the new fort for the War Department. He believed he had been insulted and refused to comply. On July 18, 1815, work was halted and two months later, on September 15, L'Enfant was dismissed. Lt. Col. Walker Armistead of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, took over the work, and within a few weeks the first detailed plans of the proposed work were presented. During the years that followed, construction of the new brick fort progressed steadily under the direction of his assis-



tant, Capt. T.W. Maurice. On October 2, 1824, the fort was declared finished, though as yet unarmed. It had cost \$426,000.

About 20 years later, an extensive project to repair and strengthen Fort Washington got under way. Work crews constructed 88 permanent gun platforms, rebuilt the drawbridge, strengthened the powder magazines, raised the height of the east wall, and

added a caponniere to guard the approaches from Piscataway Creek.

Thus did Fort Washington approach mid-century (see drawing above) as sectional differences grew greater, bringing the country ever nearer the horror of civil war and placing Fort Washington in a precarious position: near the national capital and across the river from the most populous slave state.

1861

Growing shortages in the number of personnel after the Mexican War stretched the resources of the U.S. Army. At Fort Washington, as at many other posts, the garrison was withdrawn leaving only a skeleton maintenance staff. In December 1860, however, the fort assumed a new importance as the secession crisis developed. The possibility loomed that Virginia would follow the other southern states and secede, making the fort's geographic position critical. Other observers saw a threat from the southern sympathizers residing in Prince Georges County, Maryland, where the fort is located.

On January 1, 1861, Secretary of the Navy Isaac Toucey issued an order for the defense of the capital. Forty Marines under command of Capt.

A.S. Taylor were assigned to Fort Washington, at that time the only fortification near the city. The task of putting the defenses in order fell to an Army engineer officer, Lt. George Washington Custis Lee, son of Col. Robert E. Lee. By the end of April 1861 both Lees had resigned their commissions in the U.S. Army and offered their services to their home state, Virginia.

Taylor feared that the 40 Marines were not enough and asked for reinforcements. On January 26, 1861, a company of U.S. Army recruits relieved the Marines. On April 15, the day after Fort Sumter surrendered in Charleston harbor, the War Department sent the 1st U.S. Artillery to Fort Washington. It was commanded by Capt. Joseph A. Haskin (above, right), who had



arrived in Washington from Baton Rouge, La., where he had been forced to surrender the federal arsenal and barracks to local secessionists earlier in the year. For a time Fort Washington was the only defense for the national capital, and it was vitally important, for it controlled movement on the river. Quickly, however, a circle of earthen forts and batteries was thrown up around the city to protect all approaches.

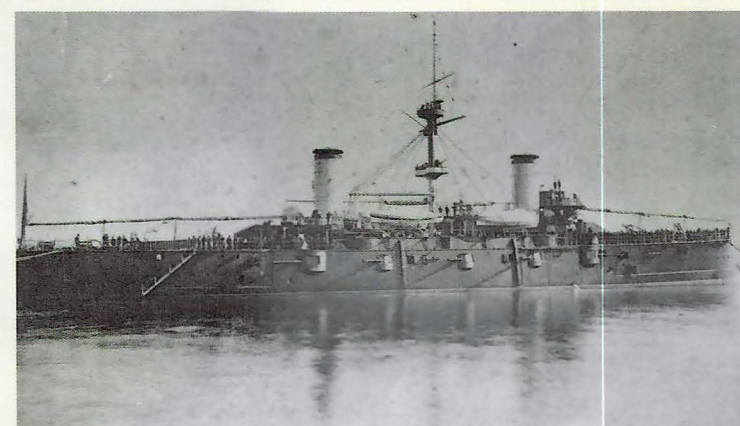
1872

At the end of the Civil War, federal officials took a long careful look at the coastal defense system. They found that U.S. coastal waters were vulnerable to ships carrying 12-inch guns and of less than 24-foot draft. The U.S. coastline, in other words, was vulnerable to the world's major naval powers—Great Britain, France, Russia, Germany, Denmark, Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and Austria-Hungary.

In 1872 the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers began to prepare new defenses. Between 1873 and 1875, four 15-inch Rodman guns and a mag-

azine were partially constructed. Work ceased in 1875 when money was no longer available.

In the mid-1880s, the U.S. Army's Endicott Board designed a new coastal defense system that called for concrete structures and rifled guns that could penetrate the armor plate of enemy ships. Fort Washington was strengthened with mortars that could penetrate the thinner decks of ships. Plans were also prepared for laying minefields in the Potomac.



Spanish cruiser, *Cristobal Colon*

U.S. Navy

1890

The year 1890 ended with a surplus in the federal budget, and it was decided to use some of the money for coastal defense. Between April 1891 and September 1902 fortifications guarding the river approaches were built and existing ones strengthened. Gun batteries were erected at Fort Hunt across the river in Virginia. Fort Washington became the headquarters for these installations. Work continued the next year with the building of the mine casemate and Battery B, later renamed Decatur.



Gun crew, 1899

U.S. Army

In 1896 the two gun magazines and the gun mounts in the ravelin of the old fort and two magazines were completed. On July 12, 1897, Fort Washington was garrisoned by Company A, 4th U.S. Artillery, the first permanent garrison since 1872.

In April 1898 the U.S. *Maine* exploded in Havana harbor and the United States became engaged in the Spanish-American War. Up to this time work on the entire coastal defense system had been slow and only a few of the gun batteries were completed. Work began immediately so



Dress helmet and decorations

that any possible attack by Spanish warships could be met. Two of the 15-inch Rodman cannon in the ravelin were dismantled and a con-

crete battery was built for rapid-fire guns. Electricity and telephones were installed in the batteries, and the 10-inch gun planned for firing at the experimental battery was placed on a barbette carriage near Battery Humphreys. A mine field was also laid down in the Potomac, the only time this has ever been done. Finally, four National Guard companies of the 15th Pennsylvania Infantry Regiment were stationed at Fort Washington.

1898

On July 3, 1898, the U.S. Navy destroyed the Spanish fleet at Santiago, Cuba, and for all practical purposes the Spanish-American War was over. The mines were removed from the Potomac River, and later that year the 10-inch gun mounted near Battery Humphreys was moved to a new mount to test a wood and iron parapet that had been built shortly before the outbreak of war. In June 1899, what became known as the Algiers test was conducted by firing one of these guns into a parapet designed by the Secretary of War. The results of the test concluded that concrete provided a more effective barrier against rifled artillery than any other design then available to engineers.



Gun crew, 1920s

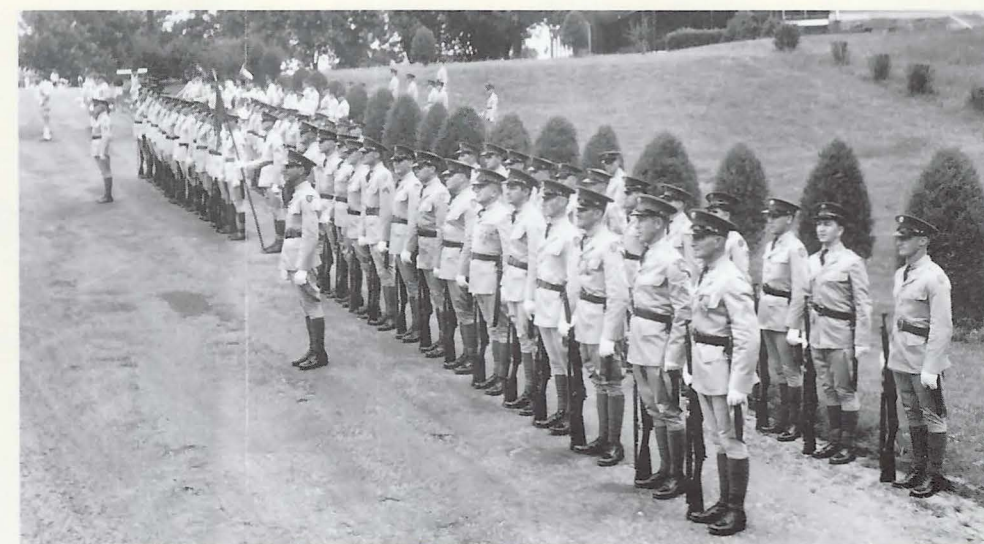
U.S. Army

In July 1899 Batteries Decatur, Emory, Humphreys, and White were officially turned over to the artillery commander of the fort. Although in the hands of the artillery since their construction, they had been the property of the engineers.

During World War I, the two guns of Battery Decatur were removed and shipped to Fort Monroe, Virginia, where they were shipped to Europe for use in France. Fort Washington was garrisoned by the District of Columbia Coast Artillery, and a number of military units

were organized at the post. Fort Washington was also used as a staging area for troops going overseas.

From June 1922 to June 1939, the 3rd Battalion 12th Infantry occupied Fort Washington. The fort's primary function was as a city garrison for Washington. Its soldiers participated in a variety of state occasions—parades, ceremonies, and funerals—throughout these years. In 1939, the 3rd Battalion moved to Fort Myer near Arlington Cemetery. That same year the fort was transferred to the Department of the Interior and a Civilian Conservation Corps barracks was built.



A 1935 honor guard awaits the arrival of the Assistant Secretary of War.

U.S. Army

1941

After the attack on Pearl Harbor, December 7, 1941, the Nation rushed to turn from peacetime activities to meeting the demands of wartime events. Already existing facilities were pressed into service, and Fort Washington was returned to the Department of War for use during World War II. During this period



further expansion of the post took place with the construction of additional buildings to house students and to provide support services for training military personnel.

The Adjutant General's School (whose various insignia and that of the coast artillery are shown here) moved to Fort



Washington in January 1942. It trained Army officers in administration and personnel classification duties. The school turned out 300 trained officers every 60 days. Part of the Adjutant General's School was an Officer Candidate School that graduated 25 men in the first class and thereafter turned out 20 new officers every three months.

Toward the end of the war, the Veterans Administration used part of the area and other buildings as public housing. In 1946 the fort once again reverted to the Department of the Interior. Many of the buildings from the interwar period were removed. Since that time it has been a public park commemorating the long history of coastal fortifications and serving as a recreational area for history buffs, naturalists, and other park visitors.

