

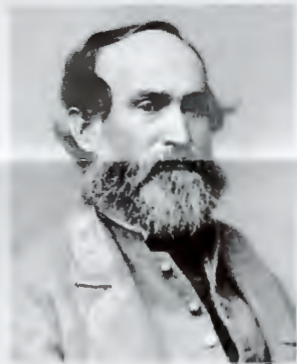
The Battle of Fort Stevens

Rock Creek Park
District of Columbia
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



The Battle of Fort Stevens and the Defenses of Washington

Rock Creek Park



Confederate Lt. Gen. Jubal Early.

On July 11 and 12, 1864, the nation's capital came under attack. Guns boomed in the northern suburbs as Confederate troops under Jubal Early probed

Union defenses. But the city had been hardened by three long years of war, and neither the soldiers defending the capital nor its inhabitants panicked. A makeshift force was thrown together to man the capital's defenses, and this assemblage of wounded men recruited from hospitals, War Department clerks, elderly veterans, and heavy artillerymen held off the attackers until reinforcements arrived from the Union army at Petersburg. After two days of fighting, the Confederates slipped back the way they had come.

The Fortifications of Washington

Washington was poorly defended when the Civil War began in 1861, and after Union forces had been routed at the First Battle of Manassas, concern grew about an attack on the capital. The new Union commander, Major General George McClellan, decided that the city should be fortified. When completed, the city's defenses totaled 68 forts and 93 batteries

connected by over 20 miles of rifle trenches, making Washington the most heavily fortified city in the world. Remains of these fortifications can be seen on National Park Service land at Fort Stevens, Fort Totten, Fort Marcy, and Fort DeRussy.



A Civil War Map Showing Fort DeRussy and the Other Defenses around Rock Creek.

north. Confederate Lieutenant General Jubal Early, in command of 14,000 soldiers, marched down the Shenandoah Valley and forded the Potomac at Shepherdstown on July 5, 1864. On July 9 the Confederates defeated a small Union force along the Monocacy River at Frederick,

a cavalryman named Major William Fry. Fry made the rounds of the city's military hospitals and assembled nearly 500 troopers by commandeering every man well enough to ride. They requisitioned horses and set out on the road to Rockville, Maryland, where they met

the Confederates' own horsemen and skirmished all day on the 10th. These cavalymen kept commanders in Washington well informed about Early's movements, allowing reinforcements to be sent to threatened areas around the city. Meanwhile the Veteran Reserve Corps was called to arms, a force of older men, semi-invalids, and clerks from the War Department, most of whom had not been in combat since the Mexican War. After a great deal of command confusion - reading accounts of these days, it sometimes seems that there were more generals in Washington than soldiers - Major General

and then advanced toward Washington. At that time, few soldiers manned the defenses of Washington because Grant had stripped the garrison to reinforce his army in Virginia.

Washington seemed to be at Early's mercy, but the city had been at war for three years and Union veterans coolly set about organizing a defense. Among the wounded soldiers recuperating in the city was

disturbing apprehension for the safety of Baltimore and Washington."

Determined to press his advantage, Early pushed on, arriving in front of Fort Stevens about noon on July 11. Here he noted that the fort seemed

undermanned, but, impressed by the "very formidable character of the works," he did not order an immediate assault. Some of his men thought he had made a mistake. One wrote later, "a volley, a Rebel yell, and a vigorous charge would have given us Washington."



Painting by Eugenie de Land Saugstad, c. 1908, of President Lincoln at Fort Stevens.



Fort Stevens Parapet, 1900, Courtesy of Ron Harvey, Jr.

The Battle of Fort Stevens

But Early suspected that Union reinforcements were on the way, and he knew that his own men were tired from a long march on a hot, dry day. He wanted to make a careful reconnaissance, give his men a rest, and form up his strung-out units properly for the attack. As it turned out, he was probably wise to hesitate. At the very moment he reached Fort Stevens, steam ships carrying thousands of Grant's veterans were docking downtown, to the cheers of the residents. Had Early attacked at noon he might have found getting out of the city much harder than getting in.



Soldiers' Drawing of the Magazine at Fort DeRussy in 1862.

Meanwhile, the Confederates began probing at the defenses around Fort Stevens. At first the Federals fell back, abandoning their picket posts and retreating to the rifle pits under the guns of the fort. But when it became clear that the Confederates were not really pushing their attack, McCook ordered his dismounted cavalrymen to reclaim their posts, which

was "smartly done" by 1:30 in the afternoon. The Confederates turned away from Fort Stevens and probed its flanks for a weak spot, sending skirmishers into the Rock Creek valley. Fighting was under way in front of Fort DeRussy, west of Rock Creek, by 2:30 P.M. Later in the evening a whole brigade of the Veteran Reserve pushed the Confederate skirmishers back from Fort DeRussy. "The regiment promptly formed their line and advanced, firing rapidly, and, under a heavy fire, driving the enemy's right back, occupying their ground" along a ridge north of the fort.

The Confederates formed a line along the next ridge to the north, and both sides held their positions as night fell. The Confederates also tried the east side of Fort Stevens, but they had no more luck in that direction. If they were to win passage into Washington, they would have to do so by assaulting the Union forts.

Early later reported that on the 11th he had decided to order an assault on Fort Stevens during the next morning, but when he scanned the defenses through his field glasses he changed his mind. During the night Union reinforcements had come up, and the Union trenches now bristled with men flying the flags of the veteran VI Corps. Early did not attack, but neither did he immediately withdraw. Skirmishing and occasional artillery fire continued throughout the day on the 12th. Confederate sharpshooters were keeping Forts Stevens and DeRussy under fire, so McCook gave the order to drive them back out of range. In front of Fort Stevens this action was undertaken at 7 P.M. on the 12th by men from VI Corps under Brigadier Frank Wheaton. Six veteran regiments led the charge, but they met "stubborn resistance" and advanced only a few hundred yards before the attack was halted. Wheaton's command had 59 men killed and 145 wounded in three hours of fighting. The town once known as Leesborough, Maryland, showed its gratitude for this service, and its dislike of the Confederacy's leading general, by renaming itself Wheaton. The Veteran Reserve tried to dislodge the Confederates

from a farm north of Fort DeRussy. According to their commander, "They advanced gallantly until very near the building, when they were opened on by the enemy from behind a breastwork of logs and brush. They were compelled to retire, the enemy being in such force."

Early met with his division commanders during the morning of the 12th and decided to return to Virginia the next day. When heavy fighting broke out in the afternoon, preparations for the withdrawal were already under way, and the "stubborn resistance" put up by the Confederate infantry had the character of a rear-guard action. The Confederates pulled out during the night, and by the morning of the 13th the Battle of Fort Stevens was over.

During the afternoon of July 12, Abraham Lincoln visited Fort Stevens and stood up on the parapet to get a view of the fighting. Bullets flew around him, and a Union officer who did not recognize him snapped at him to get down before he was killed. Lincoln did get down, but he had just become the only sitting U.S. president to come under enemy fire in wartime.

Remains of the Battle

In 2002 to 2006, the National Park Service undertook an archeological survey of Rock Creek Park. Until that time, most historians thought that little remained from the battle except part of Fort Stevens, in the midst of a developed area along 13th Street, and the Battleground Cemetery. However, archeologists working in the park began to find Civil War bullets and fragments of artillery shells. A detailed review of the written accounts of the battle showed that fighting did take place in the park. A further search was then made of locations suggested by the battle narratives, and further discoveries were made. Much of the battlefield does survive, within Rock Creek Park.

The first finds of Civil War artifacts were on a southwest-facing slope on the east side of Rock Creek, an area shown as heavily wooded on pre-war maps. Both fired and dropped bullets were found here. Dropped, unfired bullets show where soldiers were standing while they were trying to load and fire their weapons, whereas fired bullets land where people were aiming. Therefore troops were firing from this slope, and somebody was firing back at them. Almost

certainly the men firing from this spot were Confederate pickets working their way into the valley from the east, probing for a way around Fort Stevens. The fired bullets and shell fragments show that they did not have an easy time of it. The fired bullets were a mixture of .58 caliber rounds of the type used in the war's most common infantry arms and .52 caliber rounds from Sharps and Burnside carbines. These carbines were most often used by the cavalry, and we know that many of the Union pickets at the opening of the battle were dismounted cavalrymen.

A search was also made for evidence of fighting north of Fort DeRussy, on the west side of the creek. Archeologists have identified both the ridge where the Confederates built their breastwork and the ridge to the south where the Veteran Reserve Corps set up their line. The area of the Confederate breastwork was too heavily overgrown for effective use of a metal detector, so nothing was found there, but a large number of bullets and shell fragments were found on the south-facing slopes nearby. Among these were two fragments of a shell from the largest gun at Fort DeRussy, a 100-pound Parrot rifle. Both fired and unfired bullets were also found on the ridge where the Federals formed their line. Archeology therefore supports the obvious interpretation of the officers' reports, and confirms that significant fighting took place within the park. The entire battlefield has not disappeared, as was feared.



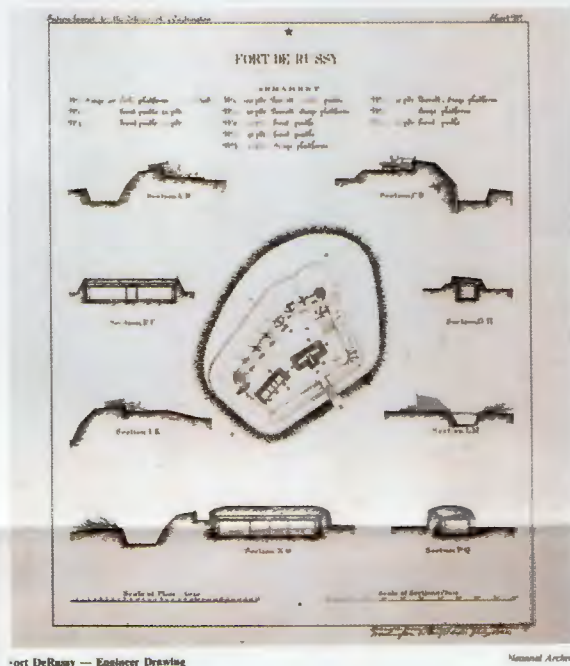
Fired Bullets, a Piece of Iron Case Shot, and a Shell Fragment from the Battle of Fort Stevens.



Military Artifacts found near one of Washington's Forts: Bullets, Buttons, and the Brass Tip of a Scabbard.



Fragment of a 100-pound Parrot Shell, the Heaviest Weapon in Fort DeRussy.



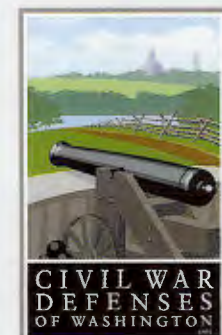
Fort DeRussy — Engineer Drawing

Plan of Fort DeRussy made in 1863.

PROTECT OUR SITES

The Archeological Resource Protection Act makes it a federal crime to damage archeological sites on federal lands or to remove artifacts from federal property. Unauthorized metal detecting and artifact collecting are strictly forbidden in the park and on all other federal property.

Report Crimes and Park Emergencies to 1-866-677-6677 Toll Free



<http://www.nps.gov/cwdw/index.htm>