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HISTORIC STRUCTURES REPORT

Part I

FORT CHAPLIN, D. C.

Fort Circle Park
East National Capital Parks

compiled
by

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Washington, D. C.

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Recommended

Superintendent, East National Capital Parks

Date

Approval

Regional Director, National Capital Region

Date

ADMINISTRATIVE DATA

a. Name and number of structure:

Fort Chaplin, an earthwork fort, is located in reservation number 609 off Texas Avenue, N. E.

b. Proposed use of structure:

As a historical setting for other park activities. Limited interpretation will briefly present the ruins, the fort construction story, and purpose of visible features.

c. Justification for such use:

The ruins of Fort Chaplin are a part of the circle forts built to defend Washington during the Civil War - 1861-65. It became part of the National Capital Parks under authorization provided by the Capper-Crampton Act of May 1930 as amended.

d. Provision for operating the structure:

As a unit of the Fort Circle Park and East National Capital Parks, the structure will be stabilized, maintained, and interpreted by the National Park Service.

e. Cooperating agreements:

There are no cooperative agreements planned for the operation of the structure. It will be a self-service facility.

f. Brief description of proposed construction activities:

The existing fortification and entrenchments should be stabilized by the establishment of a vegetation cover that

will flourish in the shade. Formal walk ways will be developed. Uncontrolled vegetation in and around the fort should be removed.

HISTORICAL DATA

The original line of fortifications (1861-1862) across the Anacostia River (Eastern Branch), opposite Washington, followed a general north-easterly course along the crest of a six-mile long wooded ridge from Forte Greble to Meigs. Between Fort Meigs and Fort Mahan, the next fortification in the line to the north, lay one and one-half miles of wooded, hilly countryside, which neither fort could adequately protect. In September 1862, Brig. Gen. John G. Barnard, Chief Engineer of the Defenses of Washington, worried to Brig. Gen. David P. Woodbury, commander of the forts across the Anacostia, "I would wish that the interval between Forts Meigs and Mahan and Fort Mahan, and the (Benning's) bridge better obstructed. That side of attack would hardly be chosen unless with the expectation of seizing the bridges before we could destroy them."¹

But other matters apparently claimed more importance, for little was done to strengthen that portion of the line for nearly two years. In January 1864, Barnard considered the system of defenses substantially complete.²

1. Brig. Gen. John G. Barnard to Brig. Gen. D. P. Woodbury, Sept. 6, 1862, Letterbook, Chief Engineer, Defenses of Washington, RG 77, NA.

2. Barnard to Capt. F. R. Munther, Feb. 20, 1864, Ibid.

Then the next summer Lt. Gen. Jubal Early's raid caused authorities to reevaluate the adequacy of the Defenses.

As Early approached the Defenses, Union officials, uncertain as to where he would strike, became acutely conscious of the weakness of the defenses across the Anacostia. On July 12, Maj. Gen. Christopher C. Augur, commander of the Defenses, worried because rifle pits had not been constructed to connect the line of forts across the Anacostia and Maj. Gen. Abner Doubleday was temporarily dispatched to assume command of the forts on that side--an indication of concern felt by the Union high command.³ Forts Mahan and Meigs were not attacked, but the weakness of the line was exposed. As a result, shortly thereafter, three new fortifications were commenced between Forts Mahan and Meigs. One was Fort Chaplin.⁴

The exact date of commencement of Fort Chaplin is not known. The establishment of an engineer camp (Camp Franklin) near the site of Fort Chaplin in late July or early August

3. Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies During the War of the Rebellion Series 1 (Washington, D. C., 1880-1891) 37, part 2, 226-228.

4. The other two forts were the "Circle Fort" or Fort Craven about 500 yards to the rear (east)-and the Fort on Kennedy's Hill or Fort Bedgewick about 650 yards southwest of Fort Chaplin.

suggests that the work began about that time.⁵ By October 7 nearly all of the parapet of the fort was up, the logwork of the magazine complete and that of the bombproof was in progress. By November 1 the fort was finished except for hanging the gates, mounting the 24-pounder, sodding, "etc." In December sodding was in progress.⁶ No evidence has turned up to suggest when the hanging of the gates or the mounting of the gun occurred, but an undated report on armament in the fort listed one 24-pounder mounted on barbette and 11 platforms empty.⁷

The fort had no active history. So far as is known, it was never garrisoned. In the summer of 1865, a detail (one corporal and two privates) was ordered to guard government property at the fort until it was dismantled.⁸

War Department General Order No. 315, June 15, 1865 ordered the abandonment of 29 forts North of Potomac, including Fort Chaplin.

5. See Lt. Col. Barton S. Alexander to Lt. Col. J. H. Taylor, June 13 and August 6, 1864, and to Col. M. N. Wisewell, August 29, 1864 and Lt. Col. R. B. Johnston, Sept. 19, 1864 in Letterbook, Chief Engineer, Defenses of Washington, RG 77, NA.

6. Alexander to Brig. Gen. Richard S. Danafield, Oct. 7, Nov. 1, and Dec. 3, 1864, Ibid.

7. Armament of Forts and Batteries, Defenses of Washington (n.d.) Cartographic Division, RG 77, NA.

8. Circular, July 7, 1865 in General Special Order Book, Headquarters Harbin's Division and Haskin's Division, RG 98, NA.

Selby B. Scaggs, who owned part of Fort Chaplin, claimed \$10,000.00 damages for timber and fencing and the use of his land. To requite his claim the Government awarded him one dollar and the wood portion of the fort.⁹ Scaggs presumably removed the wood portion of the fort for its monetary value.

Available knowledge on the structural detail of Fort Chaplin is limited to the drawings and plans included in this report and general statements on Barnard's retrospective Report.

Conforming to the very crest of a hill 180 feet high, Fort Chaplin was an irregular, eleven-sided fortification with a perimeter of approximately 225 yards.¹⁰ The thickness of the packed-earth parapet varied from six to 12 feet measured across the top. The depth of the dry moat or ditch surrounding the fort was 16 to 17 feet (measured from the crest of the parapet to the bottom of the ditch). The ditch was between 8 and 10 feet wide at the bottom. An abatis of tree tops surrounded the fort beyond the ditch. The single entrance to the fort was via a sally port at the southernmost east face of the fort. Two gates, made of vertical

9. Col. Marshall L. Ludington to Col. J. H. Taylor, July 29, 1865, Quartermaster Consolidated Files, Defenses of Washington RG 92, NA and Fort Chaplin (Damage) Release, October 21, 1865, Papers of G. P. Woodbury and Miscellaneous, Defenses of Washington, RG 77, NA.

10. Dimensions are approximate, based on my measurements of the various plans of Fort Chaplin included in this section.

logs (possibly white pine) with the bark left on, swung inward to provide access.

Revetment: Extant drawings do not show the type of revetment used to support the parapet. In view of the fact that Fort Chaplin was constructed late in the war when the construction techniques of the engineers had reached their most mature state, it seems most likely that the revetment was of the type described by Bernard in his Report (pp. 64-65) as standard north of the Potomac. This was the vertical post revetment. The posts were in all probability oak and chestnut.¹¹

Embrasures: Eleven of the 12 gun positions at the fort were embrasured. The drawings show gabioned embrasures. The construction of such embrasures is described in Bernard, Report, pp. 71-72.

Gun Platforms: Ten of the 12 gun platforms shown in the drawings are for field and siege carriages, and these presumably were constructed as outlined in Bernard's Report, p. 71. The two remaining platforms were of the pintle cross and traverse type (see Illustration No. 4).

Magazine and Bombproof: Fort Chaplin was provided with one of each. General dimensions and views of both are provided in

11. Alexander to J. Dean, January 13, 1866 Letterbook, Chief Engineer, Defenses of Washington, RG 77, NA certifies that oak and chestnut timber cut on Dean's land was used in the construction of Fort Chaplin.

illustrations. The magazine dimensions incorporate the standard 12 feet width to accommodate the storage of powder barrels in three ranges. The bombproof appears to have been primarily an implement room rather than a barrack for the garrison. Evidence suggests that the logwork of both was oak and chestnut. Construction principles are those described in Barnard's Report (pp., 65-70) as standard north of the Potomac (the same as applied at Fort Greble).

Miscellaneous Details: Standard interior items of a fort such as this one, would have included a well to serve the garrison in time of siege and a flagstaff. No evidence has been found to support the existence of either at Fort Chaplin. However, in 1933, National Park Service maintenance men filled-up an old well "about (6) six feet deep and (2 1/2) two and one-half feet in diameter." Its location in the park, "just opposite 4130 East Capitol Street on top of the hill," would place it in close proximity to the rear of the fort.¹² Whether this well dates from the historic period is unknown.

12. G. M. Hollins to E. P. Rennie, Jan. 11, 1933, 1460/Fort Chaplin, National Capital Region, National Park Service.

ARCHITECTURAL DATA

ARCHEOLOGICAL DATA

LANDSCAPE DATA

Maps contemporaneous to the historic period show Fort Chaplin overlooking an open field from the edge of a surrounding wood. Erection of the fort required clearance of trees from the site and it is probable that the surrounding woods were felled to provide materials for construction of the fort and to open the range for its guns.

The topography in the immediate vicinity has apparently changed little in the last century. A map of the mid-1890's shows an orchard just northeast of the fort and scattered trees growing within the fort itself, but most of the surrounding land appears clear of tree cover. Today the fort site is thickly wooded with a second growth not present in the historic period.

Excepting the return to woodland, the fort site has changed little since 1865. Modernization of the District of Columbia road system, notably the extension of East Capitol Street, left the fort area relatively undisturbed.

FURNISHING AND EXHIBITION DATA

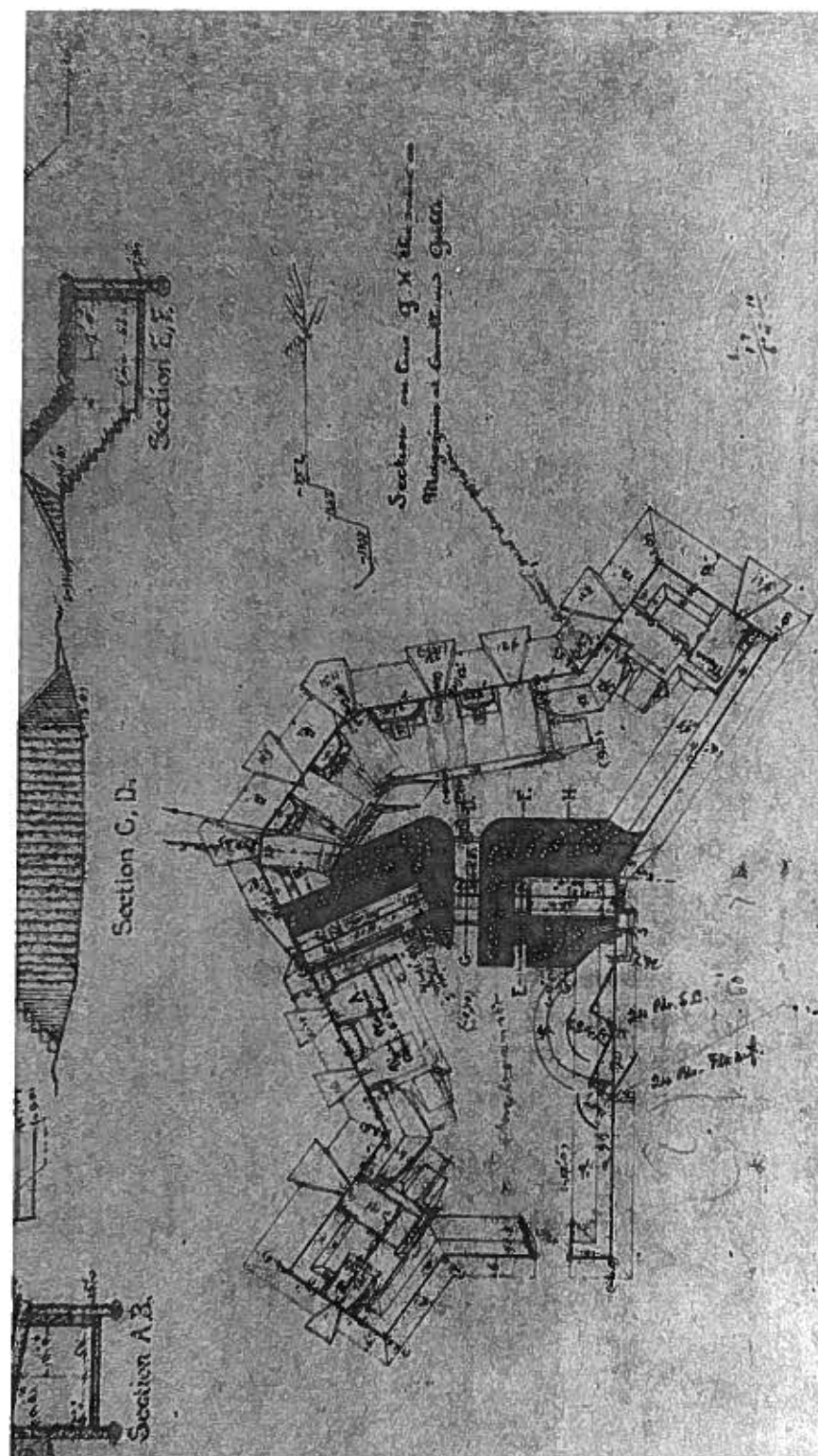
The Master Plan for Fort Circle Park contemplates only stabilization of Fort Chaplin. There are to be no exhibits.

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LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

1. Fort Chaplin topographical working drawing, National Archives.
2. Fort Chaplin, Plan and Sections, working drawing, National Archives.
3. Fort Chaplin, Plan and Sections, record drawing, National Archives.
4. Fort Chaplin, Arrangement of the guns to the left of the magazine, National Archives.



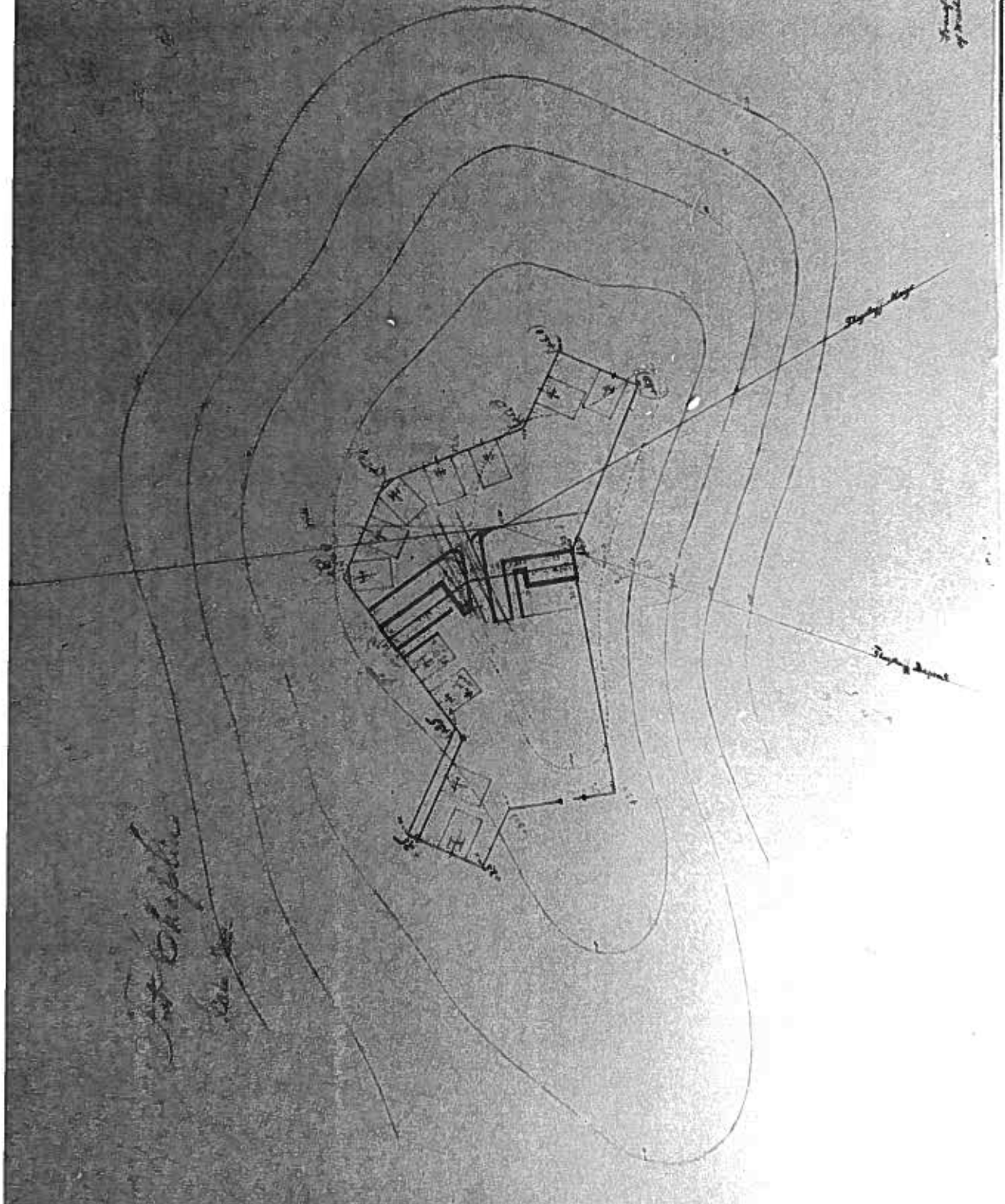
FORT CHAPLIN.

Scale of Plan 1" = 10'

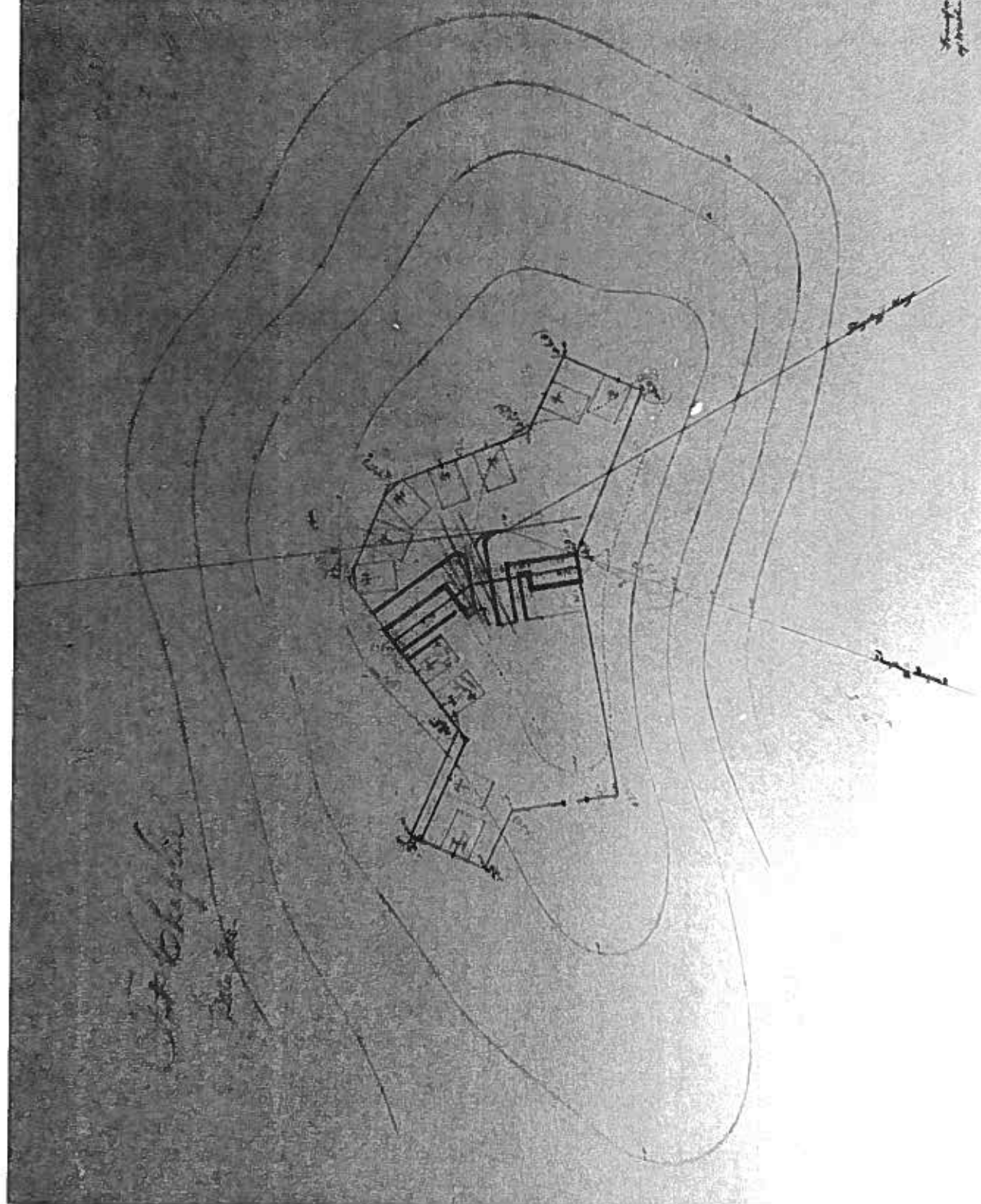
Scale of Sections 1" = 6'

*Designed by Major G. M. Meade
of Washington Long Island City, N.Y.*

69-69
169-69



69-691
The Great Wall of China

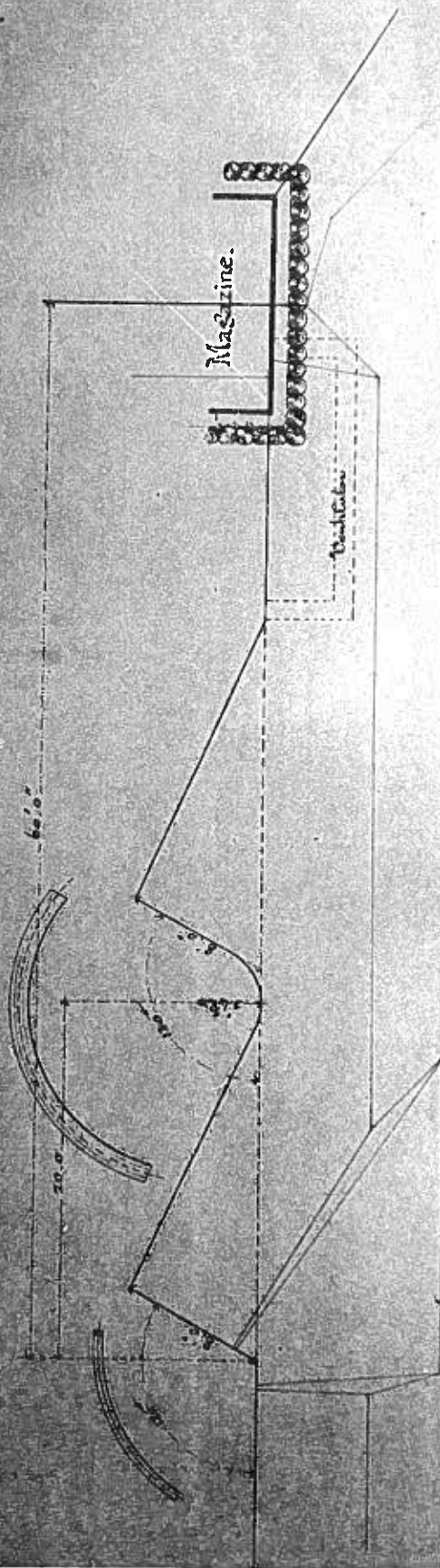


Site sketch
June 1969

FORT CHAPLIN.

Arrangement for Guns to the left of Magazine.

Scale 1/8"



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