

HISTORIC STRUCTURES REPORT

Part I

FORT DAVIS, D.C.

Fort Circle Park
East National Capital Park

by

June 1967

Charles H. McCormick

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East National Capital Parks

compiled
by

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Washington, D. C.

June 1967

Recommended	_____	_____
	Superintendent, East National Capital Parks	Date
Approval	_____	_____
	Regional Director, National Capital Region	Date

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
ADMINISTRATIVE DATA SECTION.	
HISTORICAL DATA SECTION.	
ARCHITECTURAL DATA SECTION	
ARCHEOLOGICAL DATA SECTION	
LANDSCAPE DATA SECTION	
EXHIBITION DATA SECTION.	

ADMINISTRATIVE DATA

a. Name and number of structure:

Fort Davis, an earthwork fort, is located in reservation number 336 at Pennsylvania and Alabama Avenues, S. E.

b. Proposed use of structure:

The fort is proposed as an interpretive feature especially designed for school children. Special features of the program might include a set of artilleryman's tools with cannon and a refurbished bombproof magazine.

c. Justification for such use:

The fort is a part of Fort Circle Park established under the Capper-Crampton Act of May 29, 1930, and amendments. As such it is dedicated to the preservation and prevention of the Fort Circle's role in the defenses of Washington. The use of the partially restored fort, its structures, and furnishings will greatly enhance the story by adding things the children can see and touch as well as read and hear about.

d. Provisions for operating the structure:

Fort Davis, being a part of Fort Circle Park and East National Capital Parks, will be restored, preserved, and interpreted by the National Park Service.

e. Cooperative agreements:

No cooperative agreements are planned in connection with the operation of the restored fort. It will be presented as a self-service type installation.

f. Brief description of proposed construction activity:

Partial restoration is recommended for this site, including the following fort features: entrance, one bombproof magazine and one side of the main wall. Remaining sections will be repaired and stabilized to check and prevent erosion.

g. Estimate of cost of proposed construction activity.

h. Photograph of existing condition of the structure.

HISTORICAL DATA

In November or December of 1861, as a part of the general commitment to protect Washington from Confederate attack after the summer's military disaster at First Manassas, the United States Army began the construction of a temporary field fortification astride Ridge Road in the countryside east of the Anacostia (Eastern Branch of the Potomac River).¹ The fortification, later named Fort Davis, was one link in a chain of 10 forts constructed along the crest of a six-mile long, wooded ridge overlooking Washington from east of the Anacostia. The overall purpose of the fortifications across the Anacostia embraced the prevention of the placement of Confederate artillery on the ridge where it would be in position to bombard the Capitol, Navy Yard, War Department Arsenal, and other government facilities, and the interdiction of possible Confederate cavalry rushes against the two bridges (Benning's and the Navy Yard) that provided access to the city from the east and southeast. In this overall system, Fort Davis functioned as a supporting work to cover the left flank of the larger Fort Baker.²

1. Brig. Gen. John G. Barnard to Brig. Gen. R. B. Marcy, October 28, 1861, in box of papers of D. P. Woodbury and Miscellaneous, Defenses of Washington, Records Group 77, National Archives and John G. Barnard, A Report on the Defenses of Washington to the Chief Engineer, Professional Papers of the Corps of Engineers, Number 20 (Washington, 1871), p. 14.

2. Ibid., pp. 29, 55-57.

Constructed of packed earth reveted with wooden planks and poles, Fort Davis was a relatively small work, an irregular septagon, with a perimeter of 220 yards. The thickness of the earthen walls of the fort varied from 6 feet (top) and 16 feet (base) in the rear to 12 feet (top) and 20 feet (base) in front. The ditch or dry moat surrounding the fort was 7 feet deep and 17 feet wide. Beyond the ditch was an abatis of tree tops 16-20 feet long, laid with the branches pointing away from the fort. Entrance to the fort was by means of a wooden bridge and stockaded sally port guarded by two inward opening log gates. Within the fort were two bombproof magazines. These structures, half-sunk below the level of the terre-plein, were constructed by piling earth on log shoring to sufficient thickness to protect the interior from artillery fire. The larger magazine, built to abut the southeast face (front) parapet, was entered from a door at the rear (northwest). The entrance led first to an implement room 16 feet by approximately 8 feet. A corridor 8 feet long led to the powder room, 10 feet by 28 feet 3 inches by approximately 6 feet, 6 inches. The center magazine, its entrance facing the sally port, had an implement room 16 feet square by 8 feet high and, connected to it by a 10 foot corridor, a powder room 10 feet by 20 feet by approximately 6 feet, 6 inches.³

3. Capt. E. A. Chapman to Lt. Col. J. A. Hardie March 17, 1864, in box of Papers of D. P. Woodbury and Miscellaneous, Defenses of Washington, Records Group 77, National Archives; Plan of Fort Davis, Dr. 69, Sh. 85, Cartographic Division, Records Group 77, National Archives; Lt. Col. B. S. Alexander to V. P. and F. E. Corbett, Jan. 6, 1865, Letterbook, Headquarters, Defenses of Washington, Records Group 77, National Archives.

Other known interior features of the fort were a well, 142 feet deep, location unknown, and a flagstaff of undetermined style and location. Thirteen gun emplacements, all of them embrasured, were provided.⁴

As originally constructed in the winter of 1861-1862, Fort Davis was comparatively rude structure. Naked earthen banks eroded rapidly and plank revetment proved inadequate to continued use. Preservation of the fortification through four years of war and the tactical strengthening of the work necessitated repairs and modifications. The sodding of parapets and repairing the revetment increased the resistance of the embankments to erosion.⁵ In 1864, two new gun platforms were laid and new embrasures cut into the parapet. In addition, Brigadier General John G. Barnard, Chief Engineer of the Defenses of Washington, recommended construction of the traverse in front of the sally port to provide covering fire on the gate and to protect the entrance to the center magazine. Rifle trenches were

4. Number and Description of Guns at Fort Davis, D. C. [January, 1863?], Cartographic Division, Records Group 77, National Archives and Alexander to Col. S. H. Taylor, August 7, 1864, Records Group, National Archives.

5. Barnard, Report, pp. 63, 65; John D. Vautier, History of the 88th Pennsylvania Volunteers in the War for Union, 1861-1865 (Philadelphia, 1894), p. 24; and Brig. Gen. Abner Doubleday to Barnard, March 20, 1862, Letters Sent, 5th Army Corps, Army of the Potomac, Records Group 98, National Archives.

also recommended to cover hidden approaches to the fort.⁶ Further research will be necessary to determine if these recommendations were implemented.

In June 1865, War Department Special Order 315, dictated the abandonment of a number of forts around Washington including Fort Davis. Engineer employees and troops then removed the guns and salvageable hardware from the fort. Woodwork and abatis of the fort were then sold and on November 6, 1865 a public auction at Fort Davis disposed of the wooden Quartermaster structures near the fort: a barrack (100 x 20 feet), an officer's quarters (24 x 16 feet), a mess house (20 x 50 feet), and a guard house (18 x 24 feet). The property was then returned to its owner, Daniel F. Lee.⁷

The earthwork portion of Fort Davis survived to the present through good fortune and wise planning. Urban growth did not extend to the fort's vicinity until well into the twentieth century. In 1902 the

6. Barnard to William C. Gunnell, July 25, 1863, Memoranda, Forts and Plans, Records Group 77, National Archives; Barnard to S. Williams, January 13, 1862, Official Records of the Rebellion (Series 1), 5, 694; Col. Barton S. Alexander to Lt. Col. J. A. Hardie, March 17, 1864, Letterbook, Headquarters, Defenses of Washington, Records Group 77, National Archives, and Daily Report Book, Forts Across the Eastern Branch, April 13 - May 8, 1864, Records Group 77, National Archives.

7. Col. Marshall I. Ludington to Maj. Gen. Montgomery C. Meigs, Official Records (Series 3), 5, 484; Gunnell to Taylor, August 22, 1865, Letterbook, Headquarters, Defenses of Washington, Records Group 77, National Archives; Washington Evening Star, October 11 and November 6, 1865; Ludington to Taylor, "Report of Government Buildings at Fort Davis," July 29, 1865, Quartermaster General Consolidated File, Records Group, 92, National Archives.

McMillan Commission report anticipated park use of the fort and in 1916 the District Commissioners acquired the site for a future park.⁸

Although the remains of the fort are well preserved, stabilization and restoration-reconstruction will require further historical research to determine structural changes during the historic period, and to document with precision the materials and details of construction of abatis, flagstaff, gun platforms, revetment, and magazines. This research will complement programmed architectural and archeological investigation.

8. Louis Brownlow to Brig. Gen. W. M. Black, November 20, 1916 and Col. W. M. Harts to Chief of Engineers, December 13, 1916 in File Folder, 1460/ Fort Dupont Land Acquisition, NCR Files and Charles Moore (ed.) The Improvement of the Park System of the District of Columbia (Washington, 1902), pp. 111-112.

ARCHITECTURAL DATA

ARCHEOLOGICAL DATA

Archeological Data

- a. No previous archeological reports have been prepared on Fort Davis.
- b. Archeological investigation of the Fort will be required prior to restoration and stabilization in order to define historic slopes and grades of the earthworks and details of the entrance, bombproof shelter, magazine, and one gun emplacement.
- c. Costs of the archeological research, proposed to be done under contract with a local university, are estimated at \$5,000. Six to seven weeks of field work will be necessary to accomplish the program.

LANDSCAPE DATA

The extant ruins of Fort Davis constitute the principal evidence of historic conditions. The landscape in the vicinity of the fort has undergone considerable modification over the past century. The course of old Ridge Road (later Bowen Road and now Alabama Ave.) has been relocated to the eastward. In 1861-1862, the fort was built astride the road and a semi-circular detour constructed causing the road to pass in front of the fort. The countryside across the road was wooded and a ravine 600 yards wide about 400 yards southeast of the fort formed a hidden approach to the fort. The woods and brush in the vicinity of the fort and for possibly more than a mile in front were cleared by troops to open the range of the guns.

Urban development has today obscured the character of the landscape during the historic period.

It is apparent from the size of the fortification that its garrison did not live within its perimeter, although it is possible that one of the bombproof magazines within the walls sheltered part of the garrison. Certainly, most of the officers and men occupied the Quartermaster-owned wooden structures outside the walls of the fort. Most likely these structures, barracks, officers quarters, mess house, and guard house were located on the sloping ground to the rear of the fort. Probably there was a parade or drill ground in this vicinity. The fort and its out buildings occupied about 4 acres of land.

Later use has altered the immediate vicinity of the fort. A florist reportedly cultivated an area close by the parapet, and a late nineteenth-century map shows three buildings almost at the very outside edge of the parapet.

Restoration of the barracks and landscape features is not contemplated. However, proper interpretation of the fort site will require additional research to fully document the historic scene, 1861-1865.

EXHIBITION DATA

Restoration of the interior of one magazine would require furnishing it with powder barrels and kegs, appropriate ammunition and other interior features. Along the parapet several pieces of ordnance appropriately mounted and protected so as to provide an exhibit for children and a set of artilleryman's tools and implements would round out the exhibits. The armament of the fort in January 1863, about the midpoint of its active life, included six 24-pdr. iron guns, one 12 pdr. brass field piece, two 6-pdr. Wiards, two 6-pdr. brass field pieces, one 12-pdr. Wiard, one 8-inch siege howitzer, and one Coehorn mortar.