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HISTORIC STRUCTURES REPORT

Part I

FORT DUPONT, D.C.

Fort Circle Park
East National Capital Parks
by

May 1967

Charles H. McCormick

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compiled
by

Charles H. McCormick
Division of History
Washington, D. C.

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Recommended

Superintendent, East National Capital Parks

Date

Approval

Regional Director, National Capital Region

Date

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ADMINISTRATIVE DATA

a. Name and number of structure:

Fort Dupont, Reservation 337, is located within reservation number 405 just off Alabama Avenue, S.E., Washington, D.C.

b. Proposed use of structure:

Fort Dupont parapets, gun platforms, flagstaff, ditch, abatis, gates, and exterior of the magazine will be restored and used to interpret the operation of an earthwork fort in the Civil War defenses of Washington.

c. Justification for such use:

The fort is a part of Fort Circle Park, which was established under the Capper-Crampton Act of May 29, 1930 (46 Stat. 482). Because of its modest size, convenient location, and excellent state of preservation, it is recommended that this fort be restored as a part of the historical setting and as an example of a working fort defending the Union Capital during the period 1862-1865.

d. Provisions for operating the structure:

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

e. Cooperative agreements:

There will undoubtedly be concession agreements in support of nature center sales, bicycle rentals and the like in connection

with operation of the segment of Fort Circle Park in East National Capital Parks, but no cooperative agreements are planned in connection with the operation of the restored fort.

f. Brief description of proposed construction activities:

The earthwork portion of the fort is still preserved in good condition with the embankments, ditch, embrasures, sally port, gun platforms, and ruins of the magazine clearly defined. Reconstruction will return the fort to its appearance in 1863 with appropriate artillery pieces mounted. This will be a major restoration.

g. Estimate of cost of proposed construction activity:

h. Photograph of existing condition of the structure:

- i. Copy of PCP. Pending completion of an interpretive prospectus Fort Circle Park, no PCP has been prepared.

HISTORICAL DATA

In November or December 1861, as a part of a general commitment to make Washington safe from attack after the summer's military disaster at the battle of First Manassas, the U. S. Army began excavation and construction of a temporary field fortification on Michael Caton's farm.¹ The fort, later named Fort Dupont, was one link in a chain of 10 such forts constructed along the crest of a six-mile long wooded ridge overlooking Washington from east of the Anacostia River (Eastern Branch). 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 a position to bombard the Capitol, Navy Yard, War Department Arsenal, and other government facilities in Washington, and the interdiction of possible Confederate cavalry rushes against the two bridges (Benning's and Navy Yard) that provided access to the city from the east and southeast. In this system, Fort Dupont functioned as a supporting work, covering the right flank and rear of the larger Fort Meigs, which occupied an advanced position.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; "Plan of Fort on Caton's Farm, 1861." Cartographic Division, 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. Barnard, Report, pp. 29, 55-57.

Constructed of packed earth revetted with wooden planks and poles, Fort Dupont was a relatively small work built in the shape of a regular hexagon 100 feet on a side. The earthen walls of the fort were 13 feet thick and the depth of the ditch or dry moat surrounding the fort was 8 feet. Beyond the ditch an abatis of tree tops 16 to 20 feet long laid with the branches pointing away from the fort presented would-be attackers with an entangling obstacle. Entrance to the fort was by means of a wooden drawbridge and stockaded sally-port guarded by two inward-swinging log gates. The only structure of consequence within the fort, was the bombproof magazine. This structure, half-sunk below the level of the terreplein, was constructed by piling earth on log shoring to sufficient thickness to protect the inner rooms from artillery fire. The entrance, facing the sally-port, led first to the implement room 18' x 20' x 8' and then to the powder magazine 12' x 30' x 6'6". Other known interior features of the fort were a flag pole of undetermined style and location and a well 12⁴ feet deep, location unknown. Fourteen gun emplacements, 11 of them embrasured, were provided.³

As originally constructed in the winter of 1861-1862, Fort Dupont was a comparatively rude structure. Naked earthen banks

3. "Plan of Fort Dupont" Dr. 169, Sh. 91, Cartographic Division; Lt. Col. B. S. Alexander to S. Taylor, August 7, 1864, Letterbook, Headquarters Defenses of Washington; and Number and "Description of Guns at Fort Dupont, D.C." Jan. 1, 1863. Dr. 171-121-7 Cartographic Division, all Records Group 77, National Archives.

eroded rapidly and plank revetment proved inadequate to continued use. The preservation of the fortification through four years of war and the tactical strengthening of it necessitated a number of repairs and modifications. The sodding of the parapets and repair of the revetment increased the resistance of the embankments to erosion.⁴ In 1864, new gun platforms were laid and new embrasures cut in the parapet. In addition, Brig. General John G. Barnard, Chief Engineer of the Defenses of Washington, recommended in 1864, the construction of a traverse to provide covering musket fire on the sally port and to protect the entrance to the magazine. Construction would have required the removal of two gun platforms. It was also recommended that rifle trenches be constructed to help cover hidden approaches to the fort.⁵ Further research is necessary to determine if these recommendations were implemented.

In June 1865, War Department Special Order No. 315 dictated the abandonment of a number of the forts around Washington, including

4. 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.

5. Barnard to William C. Gunnell, July 25, 1863, Memoranda, Forts and Plans, Records Group 77 National Archives; Barnard to S. Williams Jan. 13, 1862 Official Records of the Rebellion (Series 1), 5, 694. Alexander to Lt. Col. J. A. Haskin, 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.

Fort Dupont. Engineer and Quartermaster employees removed the guns and hardware of the fort and then in August turned the remaining public property over to the owner of the site, Michael Caton.⁶ It is presumed that Mr. Caton removed salvageable materials for their monetary value. After 1865, only the earthwork portion of Fort Dupont remained.

Readily available evidence suggests that both good fortune and wise park planning preserved the fort remains in their relatively pristine state. Urban growth did not reach the Fort Dupont area until well into the twentieth century.⁷ In 1902 the McMillan Commission wisely anticipated park use of the fort and in 1916 the District Commissioners acquired the site for a future park. From 1918 until 1947, the area immediately surrounding the fort was a District of Columbia tree nursery. Although other portions of Fort Dupont Park were utilized for World War II anti-aircraft defense and later veterans housing, the ruins of the fort itself remained secure.

6. Col. Marshall I. Ludington to Maj. Gen. Montgomery C. Meigs, Official Records, (Series 3), 5, 484; Alexander to Delafield December 16, 1865, Letterbook, Headquarters, Defenses of Washington, Record Group 77, National Archives.

7. Louis Brownlow to Brig. Gen. W. M. Black, Nov. 20, 1916 and Col. W. M. Harts to Chief of Engineers, Dec. 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.

8. Irving C. Root to Brig. Gen. Gordon E. Young, Feb. 17, 1947, and Memo by H. E. Van Gelder, June 30, 1942 in File 1460/Fort Dupont - 35, Leases and Licenses NCR. See also File 1460/Fort Dupont - 90, Structures, NCR.

Although the remains of Fort Dupont are well preserved, restoration-reconstruction will require further historical research to pinpoint structural changes in the historic period, and to document with precision the materials and details of construction of the abatis, flag staff, gun platforms, revetments and magazine. This research will complement programmed archeological investigation.

ARCHEOLOGICAL DATA

Archeological Data

- a. No previous archeological reports have been prepared on Fort Dupont.
- 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 gun platforms and embrasures, and to provide restoration data for the magazine.
- c. Costs of the archeological research, proposed to be done under contract with a local university, are estimated at \$7,000. Approximately eight weeks of field work will be necessary to accomplish the program.

LANDSCAPE DATA

The extant ruins of the fortification constitute the principal evidence of historic conditions. It is apparent that the landscape in the immediate vicinity of the fort has undergone considerable change. In the historic period, a deep ravine approached the counterscarp of the fort from the southwest. Grading since the historic period has obliterated the ravine. In 1861, Ridge Road or Marlboro Road following the approximate path of today's Alabama Avenue, passed southeast of the fort. South and east of the road was forest, much of which was cut down by the army during the Civil War to open the range of the guns of Fort Dupont. Today, this area has succumbed to urban development. East of the fort, in the historic period (across today's Burns Street) was an orchard and this too is gone.

It is apparent from the size of Fort Dupont that the garrison did not live within the walls. Troops manning Fort Dupont after the summer of 1862, occupied quartermaster owned structures outside the fort, most likely located on the level open ground to the north or west. The wooden structures included two officer's quarters, a barracks, a mess house, and a guard house. There was probably a parade or drill field outside the fort. Grading, road construction, the subsequent construction of a dwelling house, stables, and other structures, and the use of the immediate vicinity of the fort for a tree nursery have greatly altered the landscape since 1865.

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

FURNISHING AND EXHIBITION DATA

Restoration of the interior of the magazine for exhibition purposes is not contemplated. Therefore the only exhibition items required would be the ordnance of the fort itself. On January 1, 1863, the armament of the fort was six 32-pounder iron guns, mounted on barbette carriages, four 12-pounder brass guns on field carriages, two 6-pounder brass guns on field carriages, one 8-inch howitzer on a siege carriage and one Coehorn mortar. One platform was vacant. In addition the exhibition of suitable ammunition and implements for serving the guns, properly protected from visitor wear might be included as furnishings of the fort.