



The Civil War Defenses of Washington as microcosms of the nation's relationship with trees

Introduction

The Civil War Defenses of Washington, also known as the circle forts, are microcosms of the nation's relationship with trees. The perception of trees in the United States has varied by circumstance and time: a Confederate sharpshooter was grateful to hide in a tree, but members of the United States Army realized the tree was a mortal threat to President Lincoln. The use of the forts' land over time also reflects the priorities of varying moments of history within Washington, DC.

Focusing on the development of three fort parks—Fort Dupont, Fort Stevens, and Fort Marcy—highlights the fluctuating role of trees in the story of DC's growth into a modern city, from the Founding to the present day. Today, the circle forts provide unique areas of green space in the capital city, providing the perimeter of the city with access to nature and crucial ecosystem services, such as mental and physical health for modern urban residents.

Fort Dupont is in Ward 7 of Washington, DC east of the Anacostia River. **Fort Stevens** is famous for being the site where Confederate soldiers attacked the capital in July 1864, and today it is in Brightwood, DC in Ward 4. **Fort Marcy** is in Fairfax County, Virginia off the George Washington Memorial Parkway and south of the Potomac River.

Historical Overview

Algonquian-speaking peoples, some of whose descendants now include the Piscataway Indian Nation, Piscataway Conoy Tribe, Pamunkey Indian Tribe, and others, lived in the region now called the District of Columbia. Their agricultural practices, girdled trees and burned small patches of forest, avoided clearing large areas of forest, in contrast to the European colonists' approach to forest management.

George Washington and Thomas Jefferson valued the property rights of white land-owning citizens and managed their own land by enslaving Black workers, but they both revered trees. These Founders stated trees and greenery could reflect a free nation. However, the early capital city transformed into a governmental business center with farmland surrounding it—as its trees were slowly lost to development.

During the Civil War, the paradoxes of liberty for all and systematic enslavement came into bloody conflict.

Figure 1. Fort Stevens Park today. NPS PHOTO / TERRY ADAMS



Protecting the city became crucial, and the Civil War Defenses of Washington encircling the city became a solution to the threats of attack on the city, a necessary way to protect the Union as a whole, and a source of large-scale destruction of trees. In 1861, a soldier constructing Fort Marcy described the felling of forests for the fort: “It was an interesting sight to witness the simultaneous felling of a whole hillside of timber; the choppers would begin at the foot of the hill, the line extending for perhaps a mile, and cut only part way through the tree, and in this way work up to the crest, leaving the top row so that a single blow would bring down the tree—then, when all was ready, the bugle would sound as a signal, and the last stroke of the axe be given, which brought down the top row; these falling on those below would bring them down, and like the billow on the surface of the ocean, the forest would fall with a crash like mighty thunder.”

In the years since the war, these forts have developed into green spaces with new uses—representative of the changing city they encircle. **Fort Dupont** was farmland and forest before the war, but, today, it is a park known for its summer concerts and acres of woods. In the early-to-mid-20th century, Fort Dupont housed the District Tree Nursery and was the site of a Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) camp. During their work at Fort Dupont, the CCC replanted and preserved native species, created picnic areas, and constructed a golf course. By 1974, Fort Dupont also had community garden plots and a hiker-biker trail connecting the southeastern section of the city. The golf course became an amphitheater housing the popular free summer concerts for audiences in the thousands every weekend.

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remaining nearby trees posed problems for U.S. forces: Confederate sharpshooters hid in them and almost hit President Lincoln with a bullet. After the war, Fort

Figure 2. A 2008 summer concert at Fort Dupont Park.
NPS PHOTO / TERRY ADAMS



Fort Stevens was created on Vinegar Hill a free black community. When battle broke out in July 1864, the fort had mostly been cleared of trees, but the remaining nearby trees posed problems for U.S. forces: Confederate sharpshooters hid in them and almost hit President Lincoln with a bullet. After the war, Fort Stevens maintained its significance as the site of battle. Trees grew around the parapet, but, in the 1930s, the CCC reconstructed the fort and removed all trees present. The fort park became an open field with cannons and a reconstructed parapet in the middle of Brightwood, DC.

Figure 3. Fort Stevens Parapet in 1900. NPS.



Fort Marcy was in a landscape with a combination of farmland and forest. A soldier described the hillside cleared of trees at Fort Marcy in September 1861: “the forest seemed to melt away and disappear as snow gradually dissolves from the hillsides in the springtime.” In the years after the war, however, the earthworks remained protected under private ownership, and the old fort became a forest with species similar to those present before the war. In the 1950s, the fort’s remains were almost lost, but a local woman (who would later lead the Northern Virginia Regional Planning and Economic Development Commission), R.F.S. Starr, planted her car in front of bulldozers and protected the fort from destruction. Today, Fort Marcy Park includes two cannons and a clearing for picnicking, and it is still surrounded by woods.

Case Study: Sharpshooter Tree

On the grounds of the Walter Reed Army Medical Center stood a tulip poplar tree known as the “Sharpshooter Tree” famous for being the tree from which Confederate sharpshooters fired shots at the parapet (and Lincoln) during the Battle of Fort Stevens. Because the tree was so tall, Confederate soldiers could climb up into its limbs and shoot toward the fort. Local newspapers periodically reported on the tree as a place to visit—even after the tree had died and stood on the hospital grounds with large, pruned limbs. Eventually, the tree came down and was replaced with a sign marking where its roots once stood. The sign reads: “Site of a tulip tree used as a signal station by Confederate soldiers under Gen. Jubal A. Early during the attack on Washington, July 11 and 12, 1864. Also used by Confederate sharpshooters.”

The attention to the tree after the war further commemorated it as a living witness to history. This tree became a kind of memorial to the Battle of Fort Stevens by living through the battle and being utilized by enemy forces. The Sharpshooter Tree provided greenery, shelter to Confederate sharpshooters, and witnessed history.

Figure 4. A photograph of the Sharpshooter Tree published in *The Evening Star* on April 26, 1914. LIBRARY OF CONGRESS.



Conclusion

Today, George Washington and Thomas Jefferson might gawk at the way the city has developed. But their attention to native trees and the preservation of a strong union lives on in the Civil War Defenses of Washington. Fort Stevens protects the history of the capital as crucial in a united nation. Fort Dupont provides everyday recreational opportunities amid a native woodland. Fort Marcy represents their young nation’s ability to withstand conflict and come back growing green.

The stories of the Civil War Defenses of Washington offer insight into how our nation has developed and changed—and how our relationship with trees has changed alongside historical events and shifts in everyday life.

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