

- FORT LINCOLN -
HISTORY AND CONSTRUCTION

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FORT LINCOLN

Prior to the Civil War, the city of Washington had never been fortified in any way against an enemy invasion. With the advent of these internal disturbances, the Union forces built extensive defensive works around the Capital of the nation, which had become a goal of the southern forces. These defences consisted of a line of infantry parapet, batteries, and forts, which extended clear around the city. Of those constructed on the northern heights overlooking the city, the largest and most important was Fort Lincoln located on a ridge directly east of Bladensburg Road at the District Line. The guns of this fort commanded the wide valley of Bladensburg thru which ran the most important approaches to Washington from the north, the Post Road and the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad. The capture of this valley would have isolated the Capital from the rest of the Union.

The Confederate attack anticipated at this point never materialized and the fort did not take any part in the defences of the city other than to stand guard over the valley extending before it.

All that remains of this structure today after a lapse of seventy-two years, are a few of the infantry parapet and the side walls of two of its batteries. The National Training School has been built upon the site of the fort itself. The last traces of the breastworks having been obliterated in 1931 by the construction of a new building. The remainder of the ground is now used as a cemetery which bears the name of Fort Lincoln.

Fort Lincoln

Prior to the Civil War, the city of Washington had never been fortified in any way against an enemy invasion. This is easily understood because during the Revolution there was no city of Washington, and in the war of 1812 the American generals unwisely supposed that the city was safe from attack. This supposition was based on the inland position of the city and its natural protection on three sides by very heavy forest and swamp land. The fourth side, that to the Northeast, was somewhat exposed by a navigable river, now called the Anascostia, which flowed through the town of Bladensburg, a thriving port at that time. The British found this vulnerable spot about two years after the declaration of war in 1812. They lost no time in carrying out their plan of taking the city. The British fleet sailed, unmolested, up the narrow river and fell upon the sleeping town of Bladensburg. So unexpected was the attack that no measures for the defence of the capital were undertaken. A few companies of volunteers and a portion of naval reserve unit lined up across the Post Road (now Bladensburg Road) and prepared to resist the British advance. Upon the appearance of the enemy, the soldiers fell back in terror. The sailors, under command of Commadore Barney, however, were made of sterner stuff. They put up a stubborn but hopeless battle over the ground where Fort Lincoln was later to be constructed. A spring, under an ancient oak, which, according to tradition, occupies the place where Barney met his death, is

named for the gallant Commadore. This spring beneath its stalwart guardian is still bubbling forth.

With the advent of the internal disturbances throughout the country over the question of slavery, and the subsequent declaration of war by the Union upon the seceding states, Washington became a strategic point in the defences of the North. With the war came the realization that the city was defenceless. President Lincoln, who was to lead the country out of these troubled waters, immediately issued orders to the effect that Washington must be fortified by the best and quickest means. The army engineers set off at once to the south of the city across the Potomac River to set up a line of strong forts, batteries, and infantry parapets, which were to extend as a protection from a point well above Chain Bridge, the main entrance of the city from the South, to the river side of Alexandria. Directing these operations were some of the army's ablest engineers, among whom were Generals Meigg, Totten, Slemner, and Sumner, whose work with fortifications have never been excelled. Under this able direction, the fortification sprang up almost over night, to make Washington practically impregnable from the South. These forts, namely, Marcy, Ethan Allen, C.F. Smith, Bennet, McPherson, Berry, Garesche, Reynolds, Ward, Worth, Williams, Lyons, Weid, Barnesworth, and O'Rourke, were never seriously threatened by the Confederates at any time during the four years of war which followed.

It was due directly to the fame of this strong line of defences, spreading through the South, that the city of Wash-

ington had to be fortified. The southern leaders, realizing the uselessness of trying to penetrate from the South, turned their efforts harassing the northern front of the capital. Previous to the secret secession of Virginia and the open defiance of the Maryland people, it was supposed that this side of the territory would be safe from any attempts on the part of the Confederates. With the revolt of her nearest neighbors, the District of Columbia was again thrown open to the enemy. Jefferson Davis, knowing that, with the capture of the capital of the nation, he could begin foreign alliances, ordered his generals to take the city at any cost. Having this as their goal, the Southern armies began their famous western swing into the territory north of Washington. Grant, recognizing the true significance of this move, again sent out his engineers to the North to extend his fortifications clear around the city in an unbroken line. The same men who had served so well at the south of the Potomac were again called upon to save the Union forces from certain defeat. This time, secrecy being essential, the work was done in such a manner that the real strength of the fortifications was not apparent to the enemy. Grant, meanwhile, kept his forces to the North, trying to prevent the Confederate move from the West. Thus, across the northern front another series of forts was thrown up, connected by infantry lines which were punctuated by strong batteries of guns about every twelve hundred yards. There was now a total of forty-eight defensive positions around the city, which were mounted with some three hundred guns.

Of these forts, built on the northern front, the largest and most important was Fort Lincoln. Due to a shortage of time and labor, Meigg and Totten had been very careful in selecting the location of the various fortifications, choosing positions affording the best fields of fire and at the most strategic points. Fort Lincoln was built on the crest of a ridge just to the East of the old Post Road at the District Line. From this position, now called Prospect Heights, the guns of the fort commanded the wide valley of Bladensburg. Through this valley ran the most important approaches to Washington from the North, the Post Road and the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad. The capture of this valley by the enemy would have isolated the capital from the rest of the Union and insured the success of the attack. Because of its being such a vital point, it was supposed that this valley would be the center of the Confederate drive. So much emphasis was placed on the strength of this point of resistance, that news of its impregnability leaked through to the enemy intelligence. General Early, one of the South's most capable leaders, was ordered to detach his division from the Southern offensive and by slipping behind the lines, deliver a surprise attack at a point to the West of Fort Lincoln which was not so well protected. This was to be at the point which was then called Fort Massachusetts and which has since been renamed Stevens. When Early's departure became known to the main body of the Union troops, it was too late for them to stop him. The city of Washington was well fortified but lacked the manpower to handle the guns. President Lincoln immediately sent

Fort was situated. The National Training School for boys has been put on the site of the Fort proper. The buildings occupy the southwest end of the ridge which rises to an altitude of about two hundred and twenty feet above the vale through which Hickey Run flows. The ridge extends to the Northeast almost three quarters of a mile. Beyond this point, it drops gradually into the small valley of a stream which flowed through the old Duel Ground of Bladensburg but which has long since dried up. The crest of the ridge is cut by numerous small valleys made by streams flowing into the Eastern Branch of the Anacostia River which oozes through the swampland over a mile from the ridge. This land has since been partially cleared but by those portions remaining unchanged it may be seen that these small wild valleys must have afforded excellent shelter for troops. All traces of the ramparts of the fort were obliterated in the building of the school but to the north of the school grounds the old covered-way to the first battery may be easily traced. The battery itself, is now just a hole in the ground, but its sides despite its age, clearly show it to be the work of man. All of the infantry parapet to the west of the fort has been turned under in a more recent development of the land. This battery was built simultaneously with the fort, as were two others on the rearmost spur of the ridge. They were intended to defend the approach between the extremity of the ridge and the stream.

Upon the revision of the lines in 1861, it was not deemed that this, the right flank of the northern lines, was sufficiently secured against flanking attacks in the space

between the river and the end of the original ridge battery. Hence, to remedy the condition, a powerful battery named Jameson was erected and connected with the original covered-way by lines of parapet and infantry trenches. Thus a continuous line of defence was established along the ridge as far as the valley of the river. To the right of Battery Jameson, the undergrowth and thick pine forest formed ample protection against any attack from this flank. This additional battery, being fitted with ample bombproof structures to protect its defenders from all types of fire, incurred great expense. These bombproofs, constructed of high, wide earth ramparts, extended to the rear at the top by means of reinforcements of large unhewn logs. This canopy of logs and earth extended clear round the battery of guns and protected the men within the structure from almost any type of weapons except artillery fire with curved trajectory which might fall within the confines of its walls. The men who built this structure were later criticized for their waste of material and time because it could have been dispensed with, in as much as the sides of the deep ravine behind the ridge would have formed ample protection. The outlines of this old battery may still be traced by the earth parapet, the wood of the bombproof structures having long ago given way to decay. The woods to the front of the battery, a new, vigorous growth, shelters many of the stumps of the trees that were cut down to give the battery a field of fire. The infantry parapet forming the connection to the fort stands today, as it did more than half a century ago.

half a century ago, covered with a thick growth of thorns and vines which has kept corrosion from tearing it down. These mounds of earth are about all that remains of the old fortifications to the right of the ridge.

The Fort, itself, was, roughly, a quadrangle seven hundred and fifty feet long, north and south. A thousand feet of infantry parapet extended to the battery at the north end of ridge lower than the fort, and then seven hundred feet of rifle trench extended northward down the slope to battery Jameson which was five hundred feet long. Westward, down the hill, to the Bladensburg Road, thence to the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad, and on to Fort Thayer, twelve hundred yards west of Fort Lincoln, was a line of rifle trenches which were supported by four powerful batteries. This line of trenches continued to the Northwest to Battery Morris, Fort Saratoga, Fort Bunker Hill, Fort Slemner, and to Fort Totten. The armament of Fort Lincoln was one of the largest and heaviest of any of the fortifications that were built at this time. The list of weapons, other than those of the infantry, is as follows:

Smooth Bore Guns

2--8 inch seige howitzers
6--32 lb. stationary cannon
1--24 lb. seige gun
3--24 lb. stationary cannon
2--24 lb. F. and D. howitzers
4--12 lb. field guns
8--6 lb. field guns

Rifled Guns

1 parrott

4--30 lb. parrotts

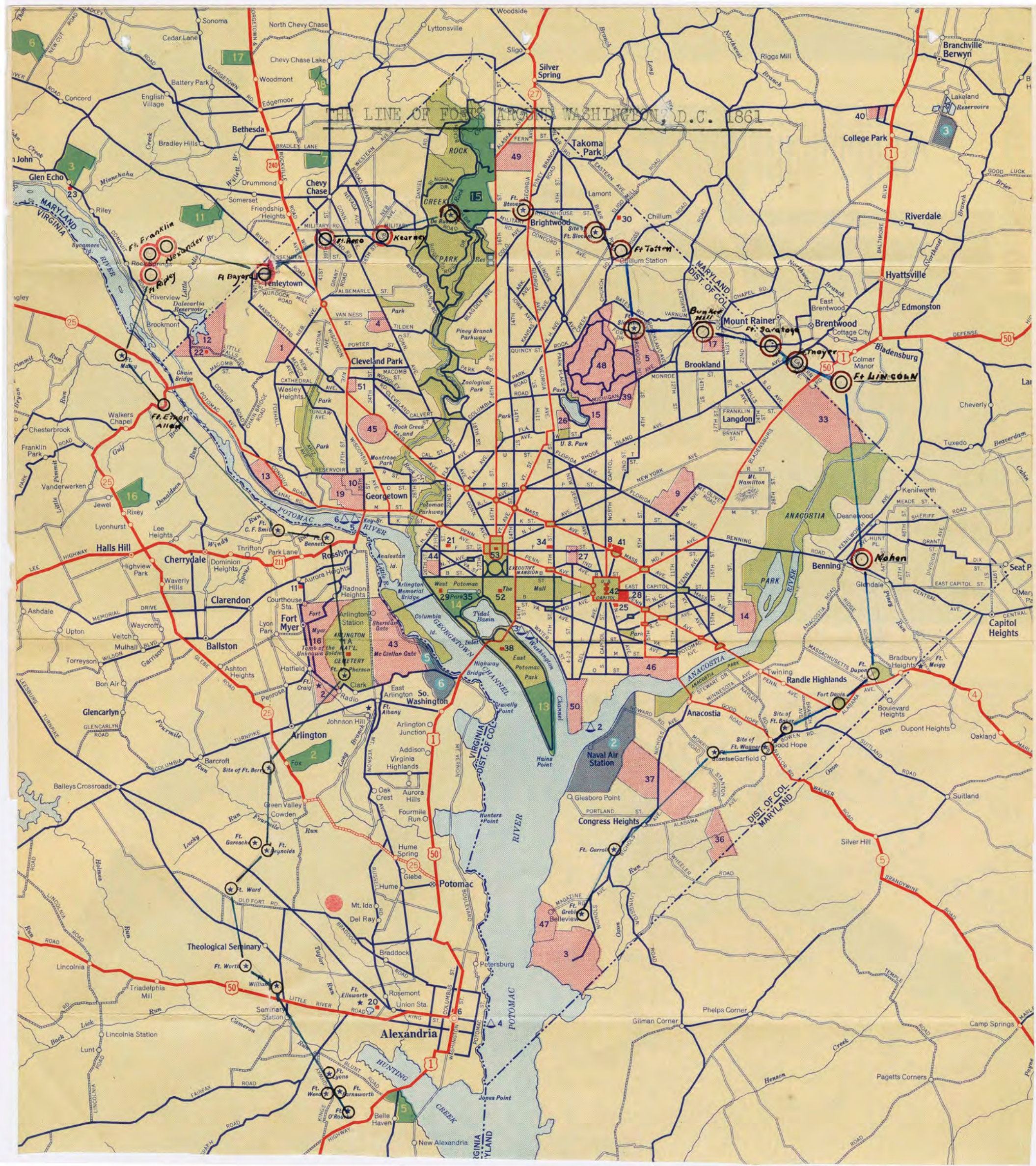
Mortars

1--10 inch seige gun

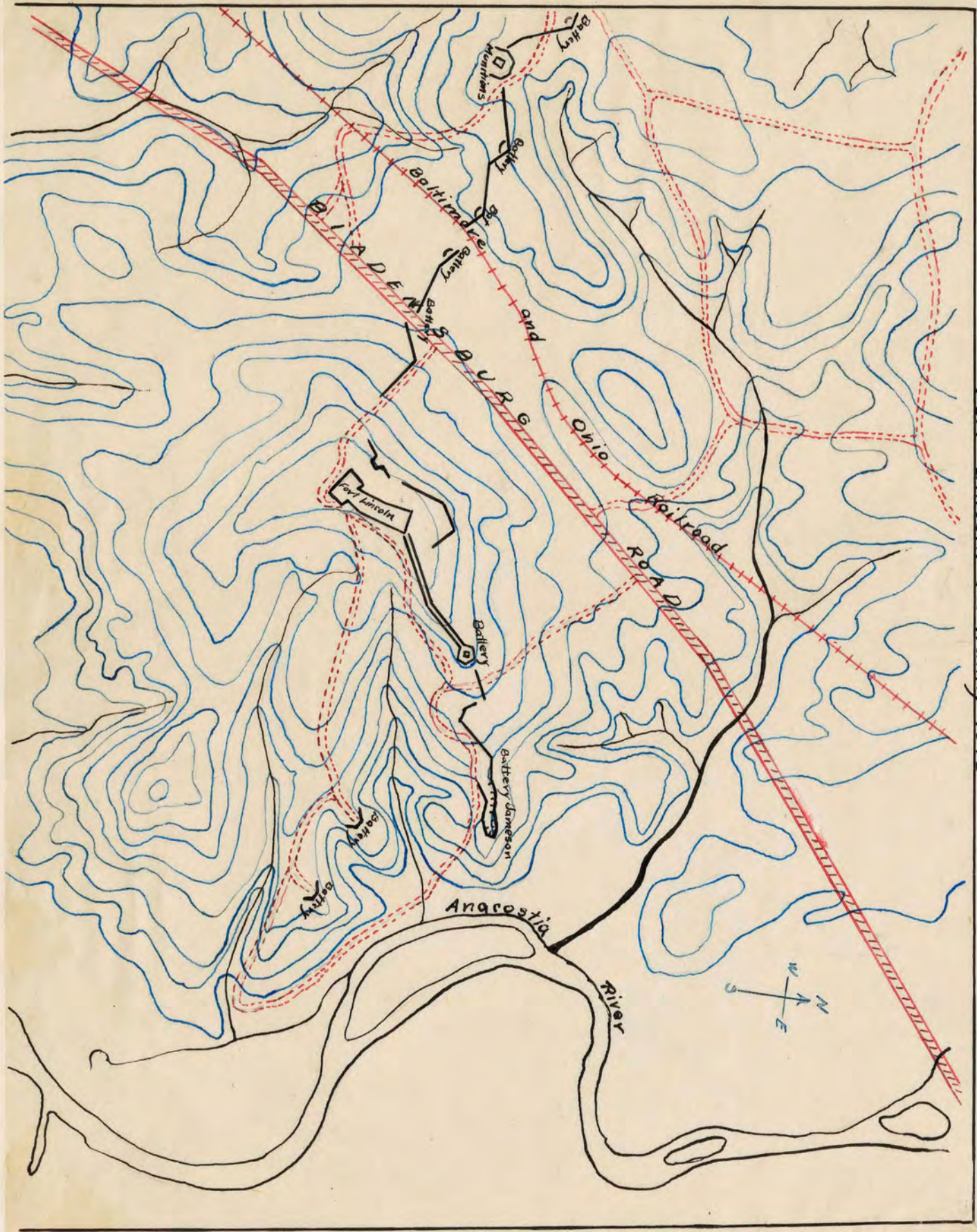
2--24 lb. cohorn

The personnel of the Fort totalled about seven hundred and fifty men and officers, one hundred and forty of whom were gunners, the rest being infantry riflemen who occupied the connecting trenches.

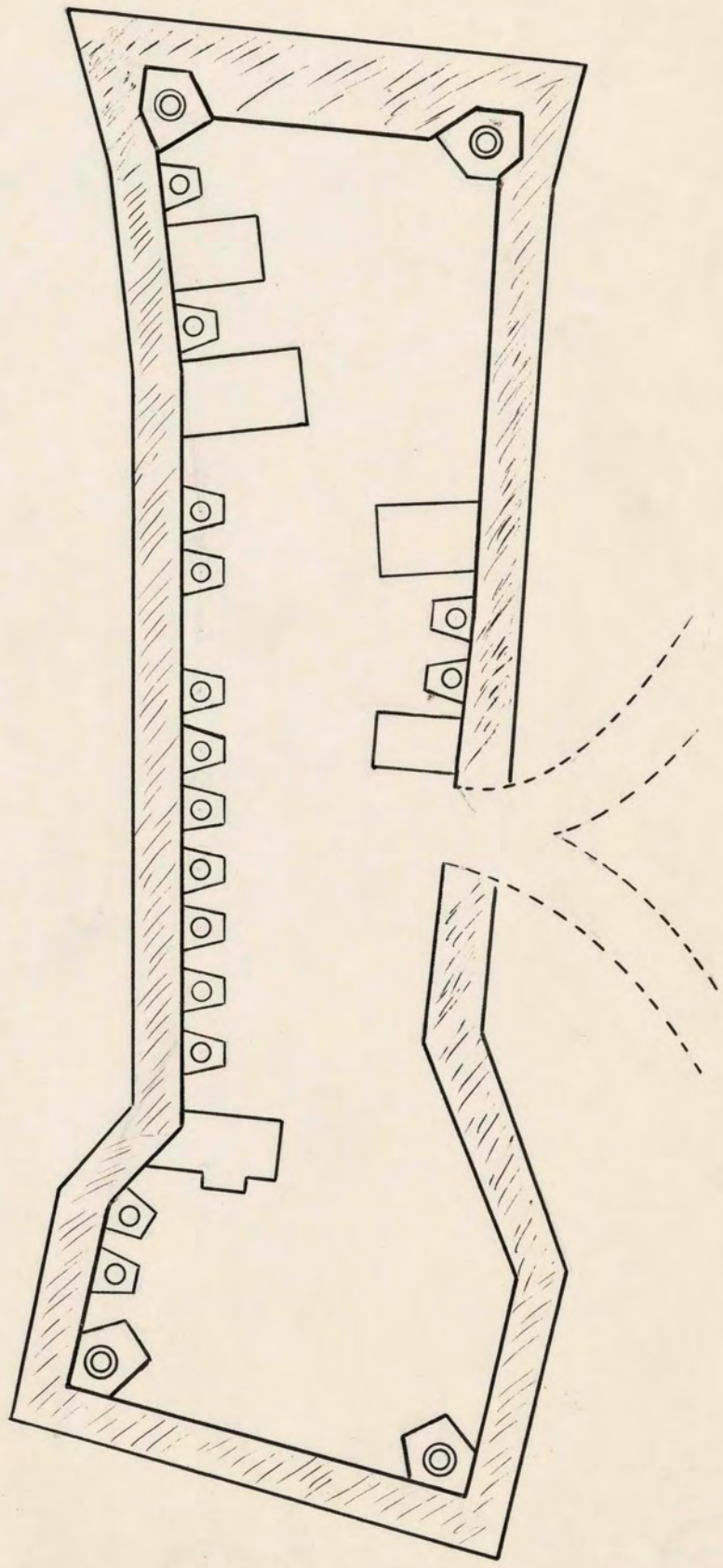
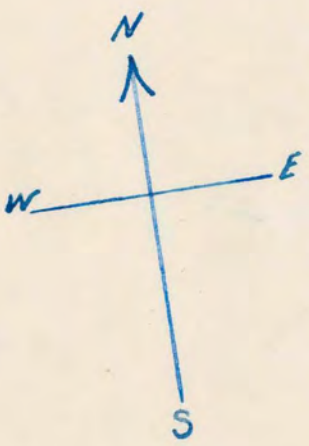
The ground upon which these relics of the war days stand is now used as a cemetery, privately owned by a board of business men, one of whom is a member of the old Vietch family. These crumbling breastworks have been left unmolested because they are a good advertisement for the cemetery which bears the name of Fort Lincoln.



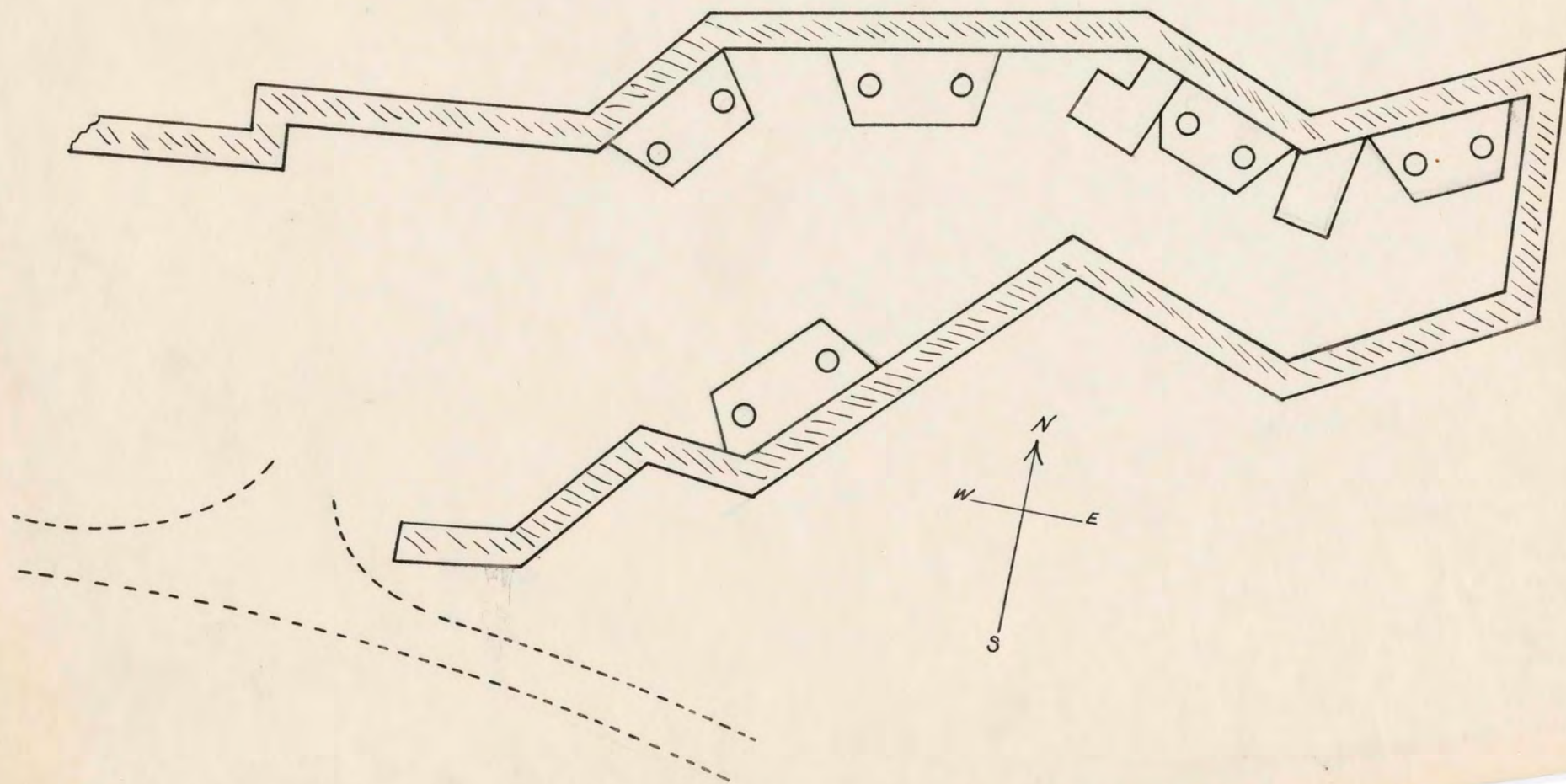
Fort Lincoln and Vicinity 1876



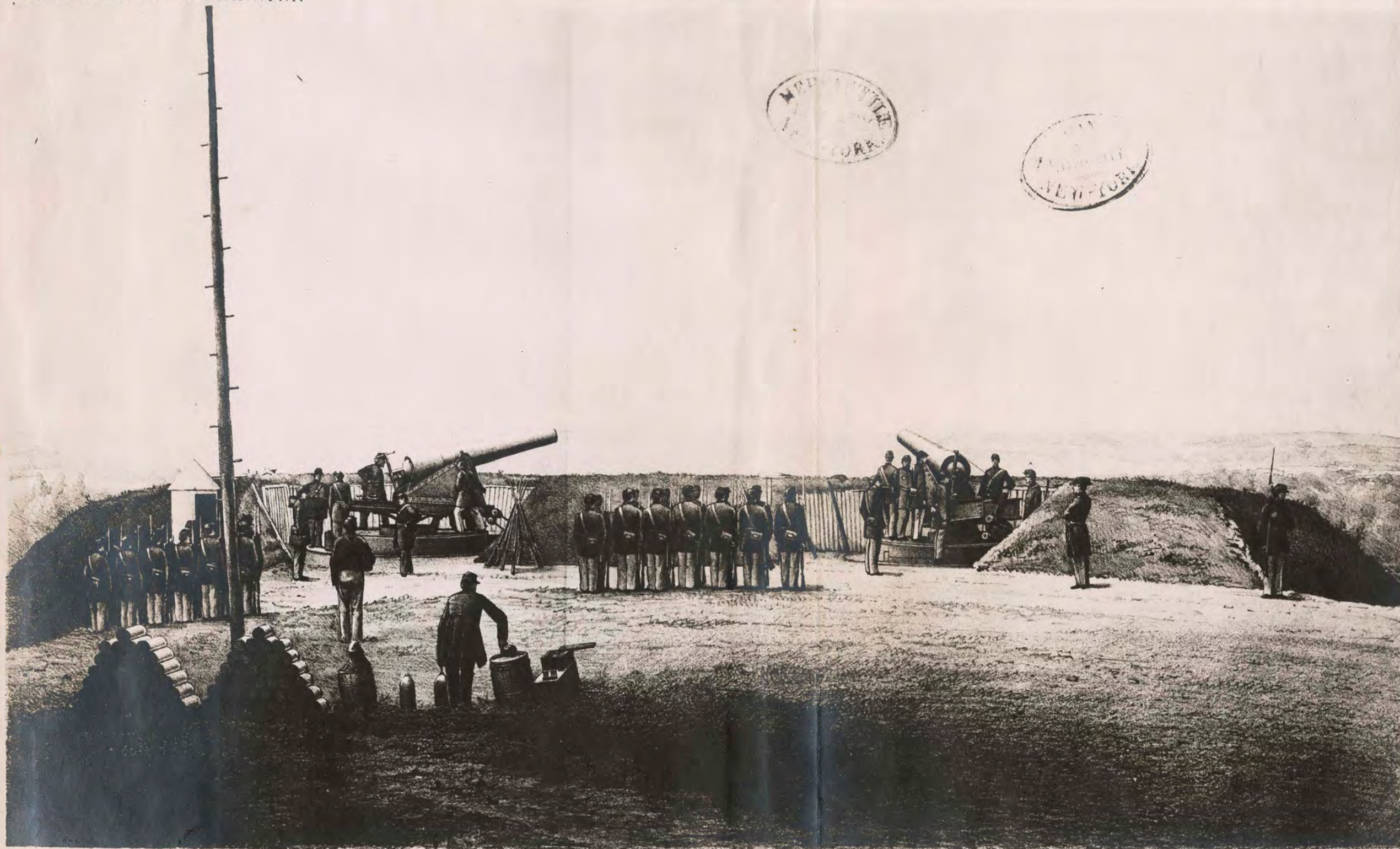
FORT LINCOLN
General Plan of Armament Emplacements



BATTERY JAMESON
General Plan of Armament Emplacement



DEFENSES OF WASHINGTON



BATTERY KEMBLE.



Remains of infantry parapet connecting Fort Lincoln and
Battery Jameson



Looking to the North East from the north battery of
Fort Lincoln



Newest building of Boys National Training School built
July 1931 which eradicated last of the Fort proper.



Barney Spring



Looking Northeast from Lincoln Ridge showing the valley
of the Anacostia River.



Bladensburg Valley to the west of Lincoln Ridge with
the Old Post Road in the foreground.



Covered Way which connected Fort Lincoln with its batteries.



Old Vietch Homestead

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