

T H E S I S

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THE HISTORY AND CONSTRUCTION OF
FORT DAVIS ON ALABAMA AVENUE, WASHINGTON, D. C.

PREPARED FOR

MARYLAND BETA CHAPTER

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By

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THE HISTORY AND CONSTRUCTION OF FORT DAVIS

SUMMARY

Fort Davis is located in the District of Columbia on Alabama Avenue near its intersection with Pennsylvania Avenue, S. E. It was constructed late in 1861 and was originally intended as an outwork to Fort Baker, one of the strong points in the defenses of Washington. Its armament consisted of twelve guns, three of which were 8-in Howitzers, three 24 pounder sea coast guns, five 6-pounder field guns, and one 24 pound cal-horn mortar. It was named in honor of Col. Benj. F. Davis of the 8th New York Cavalry who was killed at Beverly Ford, Va. on June 9, 1863. The fort was occupied at different times during the war by detachments of the 17th Maine Artillery (in winter of 1862) and 9th Company Massachusetts Heavy Artillery (summer of 1864). No engagements with the enemy took place there. This property at one time was owned by ex-Major Sayles J. Bowen but was originally a part of the extensive estate of the Youngs of Nonsuch. The fort, which consists merely of earthworks is still standing and with four acres of land surrounding it it is now a public park.

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HISTORY

CONDITIONS LEADING TO CONSTRUCTION OF FORT DAVIS

It is scarcely necessary to dwell upon the necessary^{ity} in Civil War times of holding and defending Washington. In a war of the nation - united and - patriotic - with a foreign power, conquest by the enemy of the seat of our government would have little influence upon the issues of the contest, although our patriotism might rightly brand it as a disgrace. In the Civil War, however, the results would have been vastly different. The rebel flag flying from the dome of the Capitol would have been the signal for recognition by those foreign powers whose open influence and active agency would be too willingly thrown, with whatever plausible pretext, into the scale of dismemberment to become almost decisive of the event.

When war was declared the National Capital was practically without protection from the approach of the enemy by land or water. Fort Washington, about twelve miles below Washington was the only exception. Since the moral force of the secessionists and the fighting strength of the seceding states were greatly underrated by the national authorities as well as by the citizens of the North the first additional fortifications were not very extensive. The first serious effort to construct the needed fortifications was made on May 23, 1861. The security of the Capital being paramount, the sites were taken as a military necessity, and as a rule, the lands in front of the

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forts and the trenches were cleared for a considerable distance, the timber being used in the construction of the forts. The officers of the Engineer Corps were greatly hampered in their work because of the confidence of Congress in the strength of the Union army and in the patriotism of the citizens in the localities surrounding the Capital. Because of this confidence Congress when appropriating \$150,000 for the protection of Washington had specified that it was to be used for completing fortifications already begun and not for starting construction of new forts. It was not until the Battle of Bull Run on July 21, 1861 that the defenselessness of the Capital was fully realized. At that time, according to one historian, "so greatly demoralized was the Union Army that the city (Washington) could have been easily captured by the Confederates had they not been even more demoralized by their victory than the Federals by defeat". Mr. Stanton, when he became Secretary of War, quickly grasped the situation, and regardless of the law referred to, appointed a commission to report on the necessity of completing the forts and general defenses of the city.

The very best engineers in the army, Generals Totten, Meigs, Barry, Barnard and Cullum (forts may be found named after nearly all of these) and these officers designed the system of forts and batteries, sixty-eight in number which spread out around Washington for a distance of thirty-seven miles. Each of these flanked the other and the system was described by

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General Barnard as a "connected system of fortifications by which every point at intervals of eight hundred to one thousand yards was occupied by an inclosed field fort, every important approach or depression of ground unseen from the forts was swept by a battery of field guns and the whole connected by rifle-trenches which were, in fact, lines of infantry parapet, furnishing employment for two ranks of men and affording covered communication along the line, while the roads were open wherever necessary, so that troops and artillery could be moved rapidly from one point on the immense periphery to another or under cover from point to point along the line". This masterpiece of protection for our National Capital was made possible by the military experience and engineering skill of the five army engineers whose names have already been given.

PURPOSE OF FORT DAVIS

Each of the forts in the huge system surrounding the city of Washington was built to afford the city protection from some specific danger of attack. Six miles of these fortifications - a line from Fort Greble to Fort Meigs - were built to protect the Arsenal, Navy Yard, and Capitol from cannonade and to hold the approaches to the bridges from any sudden dashes of cavalry. Fort Davis was one of the fortifications in this line and it overlooked the three structures which it was constructed to protect. In the late fall of 1861 construction of Fort Davis was begun on funds from the appropriation previously

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mentioned. Forts Dupont, Baker, Wagner and others in this six mile line were started along with Davis. All of these were well advanced toward completion by the end of the year. Fort Baker was located a short distance to the west of Fort Davis and was designed as a strong point on the ridge. While Baker was situated on the only location in that vicinity which was found practicable for a large fortification it did not offer an ideal view of the approaches to this ridge on which it was located. This necessitated the building of an outwork and since the location to the east offered very good views of the approaches on either side of the ridge not seen from Fort Baker, Fort Davis was designed to fill the need for such an outwork.

WARTIME HISTORY

Fort Davis was occupied at different times during the war by various small detachments of artillery. The identity of only two of these units could be determined, however. The fort was occupied by a detachment of the 17th. Maine Artillery in the winter of 1862. This was the winter after the Unionists were repulsed at Richmond and suffered heavy losses in Maryland as well as in Virginia. The discouragement of the North at this time was as great as after the battle of Bull Run. President Lincoln called for a levy of three hundred thousand troops. This increase in the strength of the Union Army allowed the War Department to increase the strength of Washington's de-

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fenses and consequently to station men at Fort Davis. In the summer of 1864 a detachment of the Ninth Company of Massachusetts Heavy Artillery was detailed there. The number of men and names of officers or men in these two detachments is unknown. No engagements with the enemy took place at Fort Davis and, in fact, the nearest battle to it was the only Civil War battle which took place at any of Washington's defenses - the defeat at Fort Stevens of General Early's twenty thousand troops on July 12, 1864. The only available official document concerning Fort Davis is a message from Brigadier-General Barnard to General Woodbury. Because it is the only one it should be of interest and is duplicated here since it furnishes an official ^D opinion as to the condition and value of the system of forts of which Fort Davis was a part.

Washington, Sept. 13, 1862.

General D. P. Woodbury

Commanding over Eastern Branch:

General: The idea I have as to the system of works on the other side is that it is impossible to maintain any line. An enemy in force, say to the North of us, may make a sudden effort that way and break through the intervals. We cannot have troops enough on that side to prevent it. Certainly this is the case as the matter now stands. If this is correct,

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the works should be regarded merely as holding the points from which he might shell the city, and, which held, will prevent his operating on that side.

With this in view, the forts should be kept provided with several days provisions. I think the garrisons ought to be placed more generally inside the works, particularly, as at Mahan, where there is much space. If there is danger of surprise, and no troops in the neighborhood but the garrisons, this the more important. The belt of woods in front of Davis, Dupont, and Meigs I meant to have felled with the first work done. It is still standing, as also woods and wooded heights west of Mahan, too near. The guard on the west side of Benning's Bridge would be of no use against a cavalry raid or an attempt to ford the passage by an armed force. I think a tete-depont at Benning's and Navy Yard Bridges and stockades would probably be best at both positions. There are now seige guns at several of the works as Mahan and Meigs, seige platforms should be immediately laid for them. The 30-pounder Parrott at Mahan may be removed to Meigs, if you think best. Enough field guns have been sent to Fort Baker to fill all the platforms, I believe. Would it not be better to distribute them in Davis and Dupont, where none have been sent? If you do it, consider it carefully, so there will be no after changes, and report it after it is done.

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You have no idea of the uncertainty which exists as to the actual armament, so many changes having been made lately.

I am, very respectfully, your most obedient servant.

J. G. Barnard

Brigadier-General."

HISTORY SINCE THE WAR

Since the close of the Civil War Fort Davis has been made into a public park under the jurisdiction of the Department of Public Buildings and Public Parks. The land, including four acres surrounding the fort proper, was purchased by that Department from the District of Columbia on January 3, 1917. Information as to when the District of Columbia obtained obtained possession of the land was not available.

FORT DRIVE

A highway connecting the forts of Civil War days which surround the city of Washington has been planned. The work on this scenic drive will probably be begun when funds are available. This drive includes Fort Davis as well as other wartime forts in the District of Columbia, Maryland and Virginia. It is proposed that this drive will pass along the western part of Davis and will connect it with the site of Fort Baker to the west and with Fort Dupont to the north. A preliminary plan of Fort Drive will be found elsewhere in

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this report.

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CONSTRUCTION

LOCATION OF FORT DAVIS

The location of Fort Davis, as described during the time of its construction, was "along Ridge Road, south of the hill on Bennings Road". Since then Pennsylvania Avenue, S. E. has been extended and touches the property on the south. That part of Ridge Road which ran by the fort has since been re-named and is now known as Alabama Avenue. It touches the fort property on the east. The location is slightly less than four miles east of the Capitol and a mile east of the Eastern Branch of the Potomac River. The location of the flagstaff of the fort (it, of course, is no longer standing and the location is not marked) was at $38^{\circ} 51' 56.54''$ north latitude and at $76^{\circ} 56' 47.91''$ longitude west from Greenwich. The elevation of the site was three hundred and three feet above mean tide.

Just before it was utilized for the construction of Fort Davis the property was owned by ex-Major Sayles J. Bowen. The ground, however, was originally a part of the extensive estate of the Youngs of Nonsuch.

TIME OF CONSTRUCTION

Construction of Fort Davis was begun late in the fall of 1861, soon after Congress granted an appropriation for the construction of additional fortifications for the protection of the city. The work was well advanced toward completion by

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the end of this same year. By the winter of 1862 the fort was completed, with a detachment of artillery stationed there and with some guns mounted.

METHOD OF CONSTRUCTION

Earthworks were thrown to a great height and in accordance with direction given in Mahan's "Field Fortifications". The perimeter of the fort proper was made two hundred and twenty yards. The small size of Davis was due mainly to its status as an outwork to Fort Baker although the terrain influenced it to some extent. Built into the fort (Davis) were eight embrasures or openings in the parapet and five barbettes or earthen terraces raised within the parapet so high as to enable guns to be fired over the latter. It is unknown if all of these parts of the fortification were built in when the fort was first constructed or added as the need for them arose. It may be supposed, however, that they were built at the offset and not as guns were added since two barbette platforms intended for field and siege guns remained vacant throughout the war according to the "Report on the defenses of Washington to the Chief of Engineers, U. S. Army." presented by General Barnard. The greatest armament of the fort consisted of twelve guns. Eleven of these, consisting of three eight-inch siege Howitzers (mounted in an embrasure), three twenty-four pounder sea coast guns (barbette) and five six pounder field guns, were smooth bore guns. The only rifled gun in the fort

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at this time was a twenty-pounder Coehorn Mortar. At this same time there were also two vacant field and seige platforms in the fort.

NAMING OF FORT DAVIS

The name of Davis was applied to the fort in honor of Colonel Benjamin F. Davis of the Eighth New York Cavalry, United States Army. Colonel Davis's war record was excellent and several official communications can be found in "Records of the Rebellion" in which he was praised by his superior officers for his bravery and military skill. Davis, then acting as a Brigadier-General, was killed in action at Beverly Ford, Virginia on June 9, 1863.

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Entrance to Fort Davis (Alabama Avenue).



Embrasure in Fort (viewed from west)

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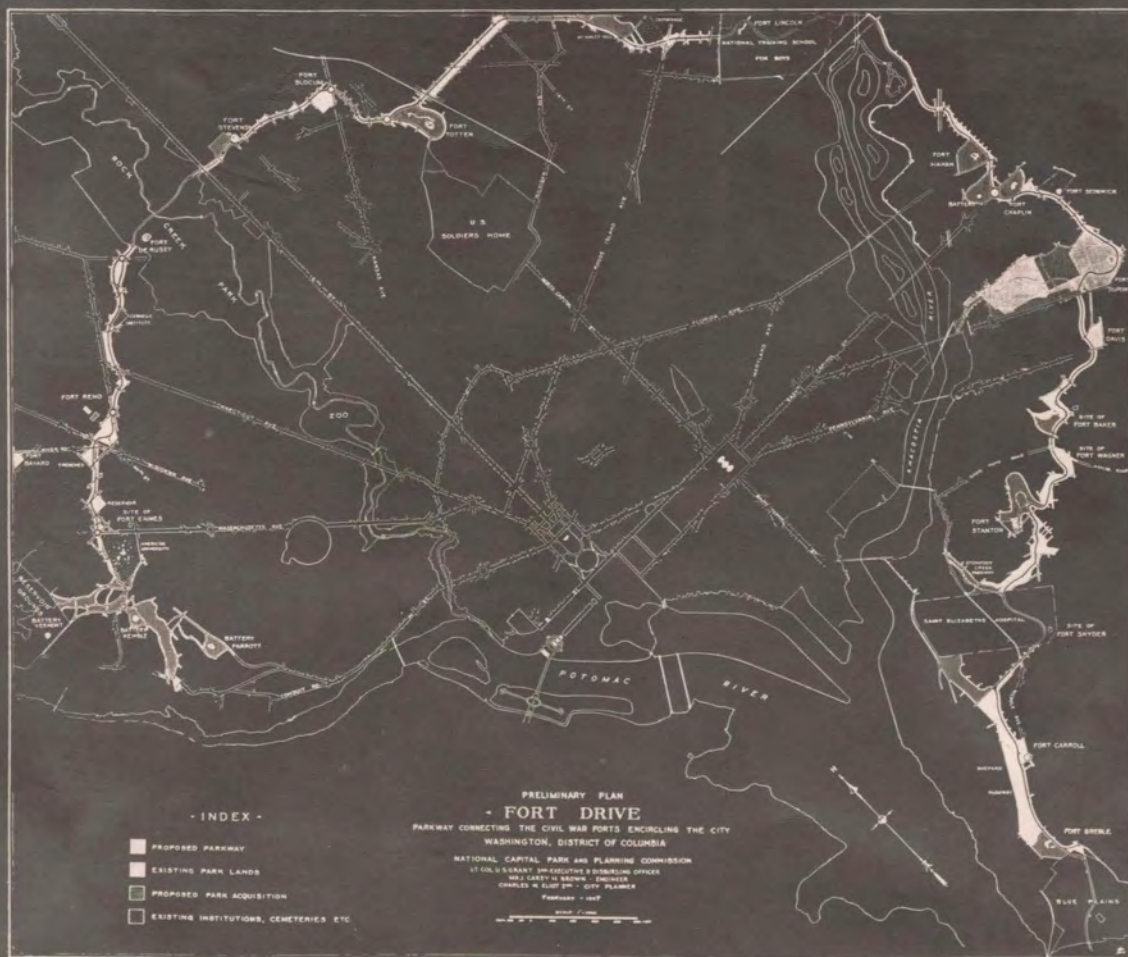


View from Fort showing slope to its west.



Part of ditch surrounding Fort (at right)

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FORT DRIVE CONNECTING THE CIVIL WAR FORTS ENCIRCLING WASHINGTON

The Grolier Information Service

Conducted by

The Grolier Society

2 West 45th Street, New York



Mrs. Maude R. Kreider,
Lanham, Md.

December 21, 1932.

My dear Mrs. Kreider:-

In answer to your letter I am sending you the following information on Fort Davis, in Washington, D. C.

This fort was constructed during the Civil War in connection with several other fortifications to protect Washington. In a "Report on the defense of Washington to the Chief of Engineers, U.S. Army" made by Maj. Gen. J. G. Barnard, in 1871, the writer says, "Fort Davis requires no special remark. It may be regarded as an outwork to Fort Baker, having a pretty good view of approaches on either side of the ridges not seen from that fort."

It is evident that all other writers and historians have had the same view of Fort Davis, that is, that it requires "no special remark." The fact is, that no history of that fort has yet been written, and in spite of prolonged searching of records, government publications, subject indices, books on American fortifications, books on the Civil War, guide books and descriptions of Washington, D. C. no additional information has been obtained. In addition to this research I wrote to the Columbia Historical Society, of Washington, D. C. I received a reply that Barnard's "Defense of Washington" has little mention of it. The Secretary of the Society could give me no additional information, but suggested that I write to the War Department, but I found the above quotation in a Report in that Department.

H. K. B.

Very truly yours,
Heiman K. Blatt.
Grolier Information Service.

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