

Fort Hunt Park

FORT HUNT, VIRGINIA -- A Historical Sketch

The War Department, desiring to establish a coastal defense fortification for the protection of the Nation's Capital, decided to locate a fort at Sheridan's Point on the Potomac River, eleven and one-half miles south of Washington, D.C., and 105 miles from the Atlantic Coast. This land, just across Little Hunting Creek from Mount Vernon, was originally a portion of the George Washington estate of 5000 acres acquired by a grant to John Washington, the great-grandfather of George Washington, in April 1669. This area stretched down the Potomac River between Dogue Creek and Little Hunting Creek. Settlers in the Little Hunting Creek vicinity built a fort on the Potomac River in 1676 as a protection against the Indians of the Susquehannock tribe. The land purchased for the site of the fort to be known as Fort Hunt was once a part of the River Farm, one of the five farms owned by George Washington and forming part of the Mount Vernon estate.

The United States acquired, February 29, 1892, ninety acres of land at Sheridan's Point -- known as the "Pelton" tract -- from the legislature of the State of Virginia by act of cession. On July 7, 1903, the United States condemned and purchased 105 acres of adjacent land -- the "Grau" tract -- from John Miller of Fairfax County, Virginia, and on October 11, 1906, another portion of 1.633 acres. On June 1, 1906, F.G. Percival deeded to the United States the right-of-way to the nearby county road, over a strip of land 30-feet wide lying along the north line of the adjacent Linton estate for a distance of 1152 feet. The purchase price for 197.413 acres was \$45,526.



In 1897, contract laborers began the construction of concrete emplacements of a battery for three 8-inch, breech-loading disappearing rifles. A small detachment of troops guarded the installation and lived in tents, no permanent quarters being completed until 1899.

In consequence of the War with Spain, the War Department ordered a garrison of 48 troops of Company "K", Fourth

Coast Artillery, commanded by Capt. Kenneth H. Walker to the fort on March 13, 1898, prior to the completion of the battery by the contractors.

On April 13, 1899, President McKinley designated the area at Sheridan's Point as Fort Hunt, in honor of the late Colonel and Brevet Major-General Henry J. Hunt, United States Army. General Hunt, an artillery officer with a distinguished record of service, participated, among many others, in the battles of Chapultepec during the Mexican War, and served as Chief of Artillery at the battles of Fredericksburg and Gettysburg during the Civil War. He was garrisoned at Fort McHenry, Maryland, from 1848 to 1849, and at Fort Monroe, Virginia, from 1849 to 1853. Upon his retirement, and prior to his death on February 11, 1889, General Hunt became commander of the Old Soldiers' Home, in Washington, D.C.

The armament of the fort, when completed in January 1904, consisted of the Mount Vernon Battery with three 8-inch rifles; Batter Sater with three 3-inch rapid fire guns; and

Batteries Porter and Robinson, each of which mounted a 5-inch rapid fire gun. By direction of President Theodore Roosevelt on May 25, 1903, these batteries had been named in honor of the following men: Battery Robinson, in honor of 1st Lt. Levi H. Robinson, 14th U.S. Infantry, who was killed February 9, 1874, in action with Indians near Laramie Peak, Wyoming; Battery Porter, in honor of 1st Lt. James E.

Porter, 7th U.S. Cavalry, who was killed June 25, 1876, in action with Sioux Indians at Little Big Horn River, Montana; and Battery Sater, in honor of 1st Lt. William A. Sater, 18th U.S. Infantry, who was killed July 1, 1898, in the battle of San Juan, Cuba.

The gun emplacements, stone and concrete pits banked with sod, were about 100-feet lower than those of Fort Washington, just across the river in Maryland. The firing system remained inefficient until the addition, in 1905, of a primary range-finding station, a fire-control system, a 60-inch searchlight, a tide observing station, and an electric lighting plant. The fort never contained more than one company of 109 men. In 1899, the fort had installed an artesian well and a steam pumping station, a sewage system draining into the Potomac River, a hot-air system for the hospital only, and by 1900 had constructed 26 buildings. Freight which was brought to the fort daily except Sundays, came from Washington, D.C., via the Randall Shipping Line up the Potomac River.

Garrison life was uneventful except for changes in command; however, the troops did participate in several interesting events. On December 7, 1900, the Secretary of War, Eilhu Root, ordered the men of the 4th Coast Artillery Company to Washington, D.C., to provide an escort for President McKinley and the state governors at the Centennial Celebration of the establishment of the Federal Government in the District of Columbia. Less than a year later, on September 17, 1901, the garrison participated in the funeral cortege of President McKinley.

The succeeding years were uneventful. During World War I, the War Department declared the fort superfluous for the protection of the Capital, because other defense points had been constructed. The guns were dismantled during 1917 and 1918 and transferred to other forts, but a small garrison remained. The War Department established a Finance School at the now-obsolete fort in 1921, and by 1923 the garrison of the post consisted of but two officers and eight men of the 47th Company (that had garrisoned the fort since 1900), two officers and men of the Finance School faculty, and two ordnance men.

A study of harbor defenses of the United States by the War Plans Division during April of 1923 approved the abandonment of Fort Hunt and the removal of the Finance School to Washington, D.C., for reasons of economy. On July 3, 1923, the personnel other than that of the Finance School moved to Fort Washington, and the War



Department transferred the ungarrisoned post to the jurisdiction of the Quarter Master General. The cost to the Government of the fort from 1897 until June 30, 1922, amounted to \$309,725.55.

The War Department considered requests of several agencies for the use of the old post. The City of Alexandria, the District Commissioners of the District of Columbia, the National

Guard of the District of Columbia, the Roosevelt Military Academy, and Henry C. Wallace, Secretary of the Department of Agriculture desired the grounds for various purposes. Congress, however, did not permit the transferral of the fort to surplus property; therefore, the War Department retained jurisdiction.

The Military District of Washington passed to the control of the 3rd Corps Area on September 7, 1927, and the Headquarters and Headquarters Signal Company of the 16th Brigade, stationed at Fort Howard, Maryland, transferred to Fort Hunt for permanent station. Upon being re-garrisoned January 20, 1928, as a military reservation, Fort Hunt became a sub-post of Fort Humphreys, Virginia, for supply and medical purposes.

Under Act of Congress approved May 23, 1928 (45 Stat., 721), as amended by Act of Congress approved January 23, 1930 (46 Stat., 59), the Secretary of War approved the location of the Mount Vernon Memorial Highway through the reservation and granted to the Secretary of Agriculture permission to use and occupy two tracts of land contiguous to said parkway for beautifying the area.

The Seventy-first Congress passed Public Law 284 on May 20, 1930, that gave Secretary of War John B. Shuman the authority to transfer the jurisdiction of Fort Hunt to the Director of Public Buildings and Public Parks of the National Capital. The fort was to be administered and maintained by the Director, Lt. Col. U.S. Grant, III, as a part of the George Washington Memorial Parkway.

The War Department, on May 21, 1931, listed Fort Hunt as one of several reservations for disposal and directed the Commander of the 3rd Corps Area to expedite the transfer of the elements of the 16th Brigade stationed there. The Assistant Adjutant General, Robert H. Dunlop, notified the Adjutant General October 27, 1931, that the post was no longer required for military purposes and had been abandoned. The Headquarters and Headquarters Company was reduced to the Commanding General, executive aides, and five enlisted men, their transfer to be effective on completion of the current training period.

On June 1, 1932, Lt. Colonel Grant gave permission to a colored Reserve Officers Training Corps unit of 38 men to begin training at the post, but because of the emergency resulting from the large number of unemployed veterans - the "Bonus Marchers" -- in Washington, D.C. at the time, the Secretary of War, acting on the suggestion of the Chief of Staff, General Douglas MacArthur, transferred on June 15 the buildings at Fort Hunt to the Veterans' Administration for hospital purposes. On July 21, 1932, the War Department suspended the R.O.T.C. activities, while the hospital for indigent veterans continued to receive patients up until July 31. All patients were evacuated by August 5, and the hospital officially closed August 12. Assistant Secretary of War L.H. Payne declared the emergency to be over, the Veterans' Administration returned jurisdiction of Fort Hunt to the War Department on August 18, and they in turn transferred it under terms of the original permit to the Director of Public Buildings and Public Parks. The Fort Hunt area was now to be known as a portion of the George Washington Memorial Parkway, United States Reservation 404 (Virginia).

While construction continued on the Memorial Highway, the Parks division gave temporary permission to colored Reserve Officers Training Corps and Civilian Military Training Corps units for the use of the reservation for summer training.



Civilian Conservation Corps Camp No. NP-6, designated War Department initial Camp No. 2387, began project operations on October 13, 1933. The personnel of this camp developed Fort Hunt as a recreation area with picnic grounds and camping facilities, repaired the old sea-walls, and landscaped the Memorial Highway. A museum laboratory with six to eight technicians and about 20 CCC trainees was established at Fort Hunt by the National Park Service from November 1933 to November 1938. Exhibits and models were constructed by the laboratory for various eastern parks.

The activities of the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) camp attracted much interest. Anthony Eden, former Foreign Minister of Great Britain, visited the camp in December 1938, and evinced such interest that Camp Superintendent Charles Watson sent to him a copy of the plan for the conversion of the Fort Hunt area to recreational usage.

Fort Hunt again received national mention when the King and Queen of Great Britain visited the camp during June 1939. The Headquarters Washington Provisional Brigade was called upon to furnish troops to assist in holding traffic from the Mount Vernon

Memorial Highway and unauthorized persons from Mount Vernon and Fort Hunt during their visit. The King and Queen, accompanied by the President and Mrs. Roosevelt, arrived on June 9. The King alone inspected the 187 CCC boys accompanied by Charles Watson, Project Superintendent of the Camp; Capt. Blair Henderson, Commander. And Robert Fechner, CCC Director and Arthur Demary, Associate Director of the National Park Service accompanied Mrs. Roosevelt, while the Queen and the President remained in their cars. The King showed interest in the activities of the camp and asked detailed questions about the cuisine and training of the camp directors. He also carefully viewed photographic exhibits depicting the work of the camp.



On September 10, 1939, the National Park Service approved the occupation of the old hospital building by one officer and 26 men of the 2nd Signal Service Company to be used as a monitoring station. This company shared the facilities of the CCC camp.

The activities of the CCC camp ceased on May 25, 1942, although side camps operated from this site while working at Fort Belvoir, Virginia. The War Department designated this unit as a "defense" camp on October 22, 1941, under new number NP (D) 6-Virginia, later changed to Camp Belvoir, NP (D) 6-Virginia, although still remaining at Fort Hunt.

The Secretary of the Interior approved the transfer of Fort Hunt back to the Army under Special Use Permit dated May 15, 1942, stipulating, however, that such activities should cease one year after the termination of the war.

The facilities of the post were expanded by the War Department during the war period, when 150 buildings were constructed to house a large number of troops engaged in secret operations of which the public knew nothing. The joint intelligence activities of the War and Navy Departments at Fort Hunt were identified only as the Intelligence Division, P.O. Box 1142, Alexandria, Virginia.

In 1943, the War Department listed the fort as a Class I Installation, the entire area being under the jurisdiction of the Military District of Washington except for the old powder magazines and gun emplacements used by the National Archives for storing nitrate films. On June 3, 1946, the Acting Secretary of the Interior, Oscar L. Chapman, requested of Robert R. Patterson, the Secretary of War, the return of the reservation as specified in the Special Use Permit. Col. Albert Burton, Chief of the Corps of Engineers and Director of Real Estate, asked permission of the War



Department General staff to continue their secret intelligence activities on a restricted 30-acre portion of the reservation. The Director of Intelligence then indicated in August of 1946 the termination of the joint intelligence activities could not be expected until June 30, 1947. However, the War Department decided to move the Intelligence Division to Mitchell Field, New York, whereupon evacuation of troops began October 31, 1946, except for a small security detachment which remained to guard the "classified" area. The War Department declared the fort surplus property on November 15, 1946, and the last troops left on November 23, 1946. The Commissioner of the Military District of Washington, Colonel D.T. White, then assumed custody of the fort on an intermediary basis besides maintaining a fire department and security troop to guard the classified area until provision was made for the transfer of the fort to the Department of the Interior.

In January 1948, the Museum Division of the National Park Service moved the laboratory from the Ford's Theatre building to Fort Hunt. Exhibits and dioramas for the Museums at the Manassas National Battlefield Park, Virginia, and the Guilford Courthouse National Military Park, North Carolina, were partially completed here. Before the removal of the laboratory to Washington, D.C., in September 1948, this unit also worked on projects for the Atomic Energy Commission.

Col. White relinquished control of the reservation to the Department of the Interior and U.S. Park Police replaced the guards and fire department removed by the War Department on June 30, 1948.

Now administered by the George Washington Memorial Parkway, a unit of the National Park Service, Fort Hunt Park is a recreational site, serving people of the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area as well as visitors to Mount Vernon. There are large picnic areas and playing fields. During certain periods of the year, use of the main picnic areas is by reservation only.