

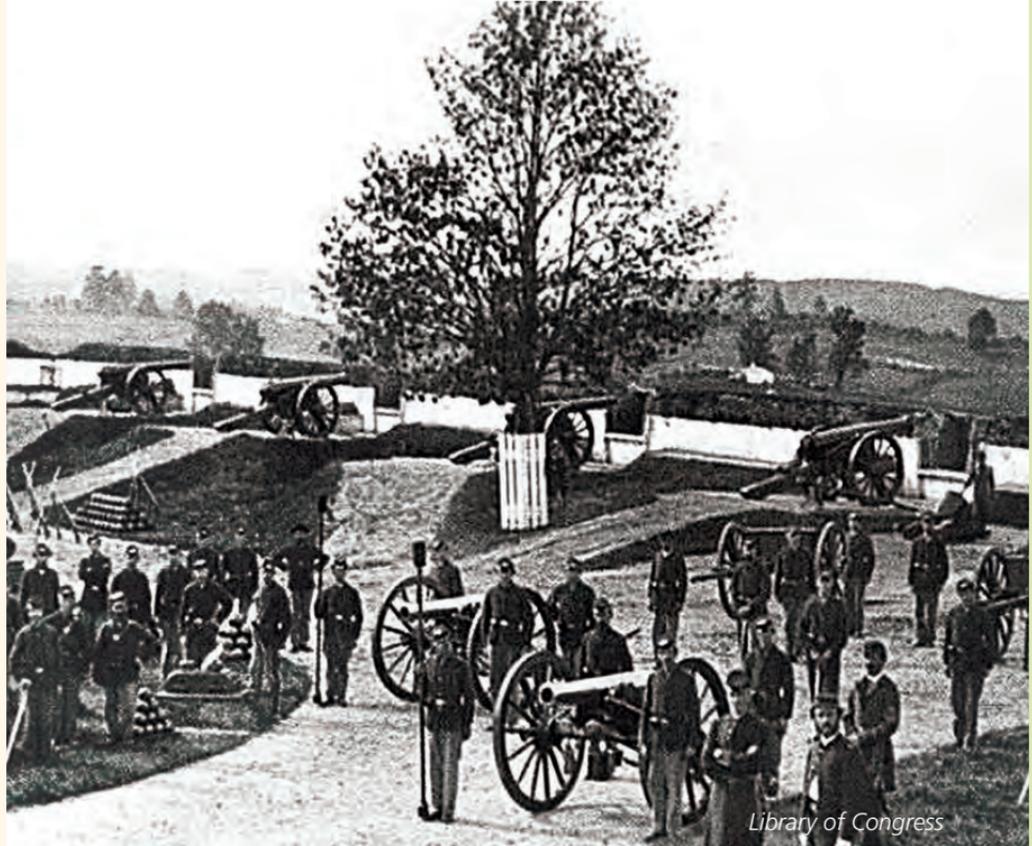
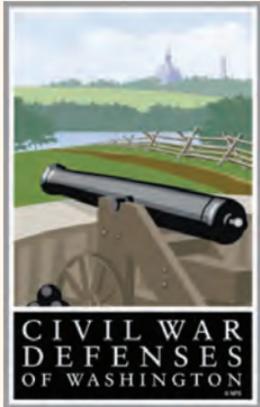


# A Hiker's Guide to the Civil War Defenses of Washington

## Fort Reno to Fort Totten

Self-Guided Tour

Third Edition June 2014



Library of Congress

Dear Hiker,

Welcome to the Civil War Defenses of Washington, D.C. Built on the topographic high points surrounding the capital by Union troops between 1861 and 1864, these feats of engineering transformed the vulnerable capital into one of the world's most fortified cities. Today, the surviving sites—some with preserved or reconstructed earthworks—are green spaces in the midst of a densely populated urban area, and are knit into the history of their local communities.

The National Park Service and the American Hiking Society are pleased to present this hiker's guide, produced with the support of the National Park Service Connect Trails to Parks Program and Potomac Heritage National Scenic Trail Office. This guide contributes to the vision of a continuous trail system linking the Civil War Defenses of Washington; proposed in 1902 as a vehicular parkway, this idea has been reimagined as a pedestrian and bicycle greenway system within District neighborhoods. With a diverse network of parks, open spaces, trails, and extraordinary cultural resources, the city is poised to become one of our Nation's prominent trail towns. Happy hiking!

Kym Elder, Program Manager  
Civil War Defenses of Washington

Gregory A. Miller, Ph.D. , President  
American Hiking Society

Donald E. Briggs, Superintendent  
Potomac Heritage National Scenic Trail

*Designers: Renee LaGue (2014)*  
*Jessica L. Heinz (2013)*

For information on trail closures and alerts, visit the web site for the Civil War Defenses of Washington at <http://www.nps.gov/cwdw> or call Rock Creek Park at (202) 895-6070.

Public restrooms are available at the Rock Creek Nature Center in Rock Creek Park. Restaurants, gas stations, and convenience stores can be found along Connecticut Avenue NW and Georgia Avenue NW.

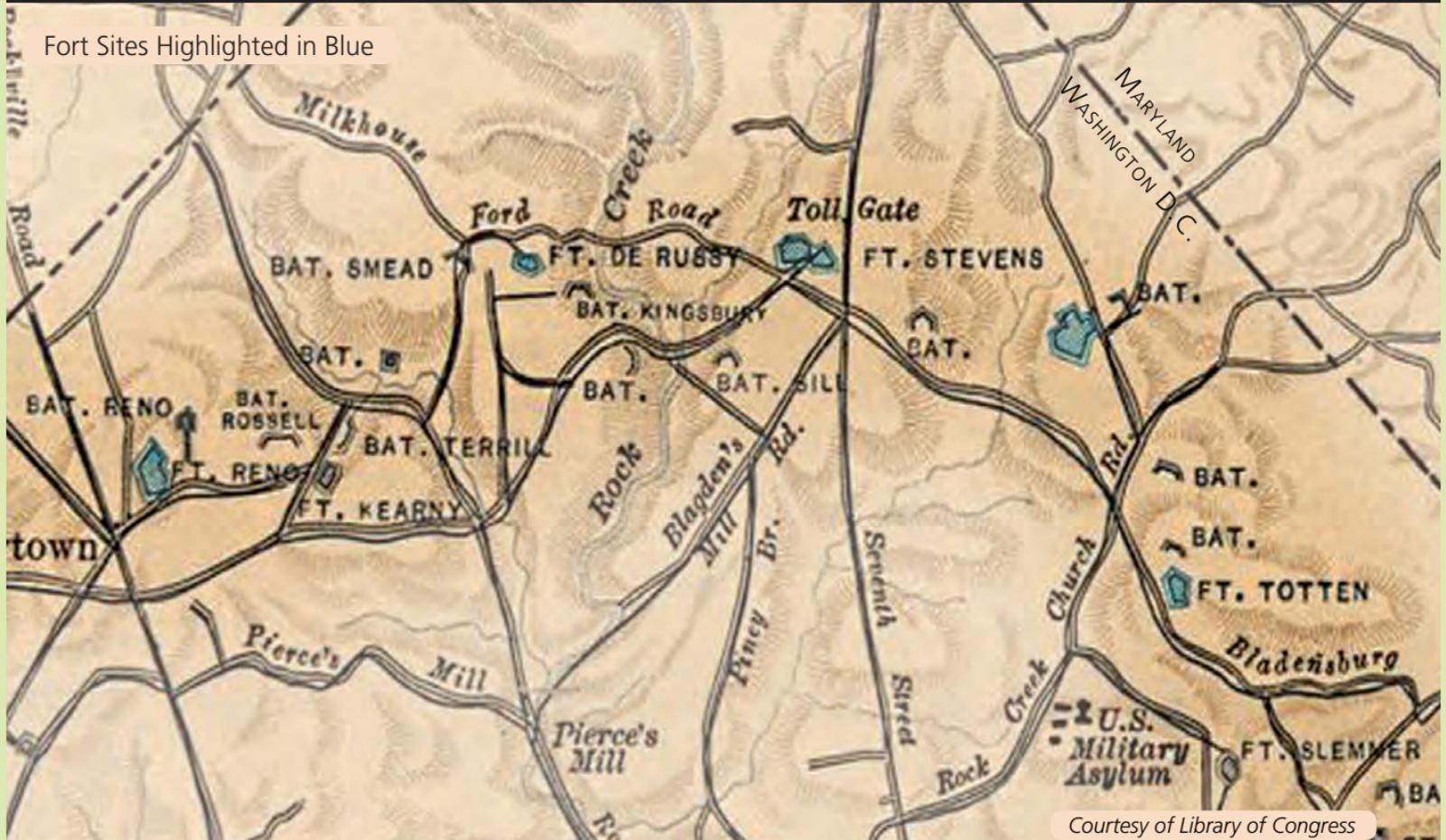
**You can help protect the defenses!** You play an important role in history when you visit the Civil War Defenses of Washington. For your safety and the preservation of the forts, do not climb on the earthworks—some are unstable and healthy vegetation helps to prevent erosion. All natural and cultural objects are protected by law. Stay on established trails and keep dogs on a leash. Leave rocks, animals, and wildflowers in place. Learn to identify and avoid poison ivy. **Dial 911 for emergencies.**



*Rock Creek Nature Center*



Fort Sites Highlighted in Blue





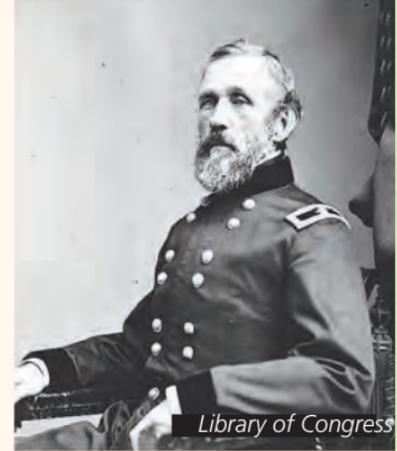
Minnesota Historical Society



Library of Congress

At the outset of the Civil War, the Federal capital of Washington, D.C. was not well-prepared to defend itself against potential Confederate siege or invasion. Reeling from the unexpected Confederate victory at First Manassas (Bull Run) in July 1861, the task of fortifying the capital fell to Major John G. Barnard (top right), the US Army's chief engineer. Relying on the blueprints outlined by his West Point professor of engineering, Dennis Hart Mahan, in his *Complete Treatise on Field Fortification* (1836), Barnard marshaled Union troops, civilians, and escaped slaves to transform a largely rural area into a landscape of war.

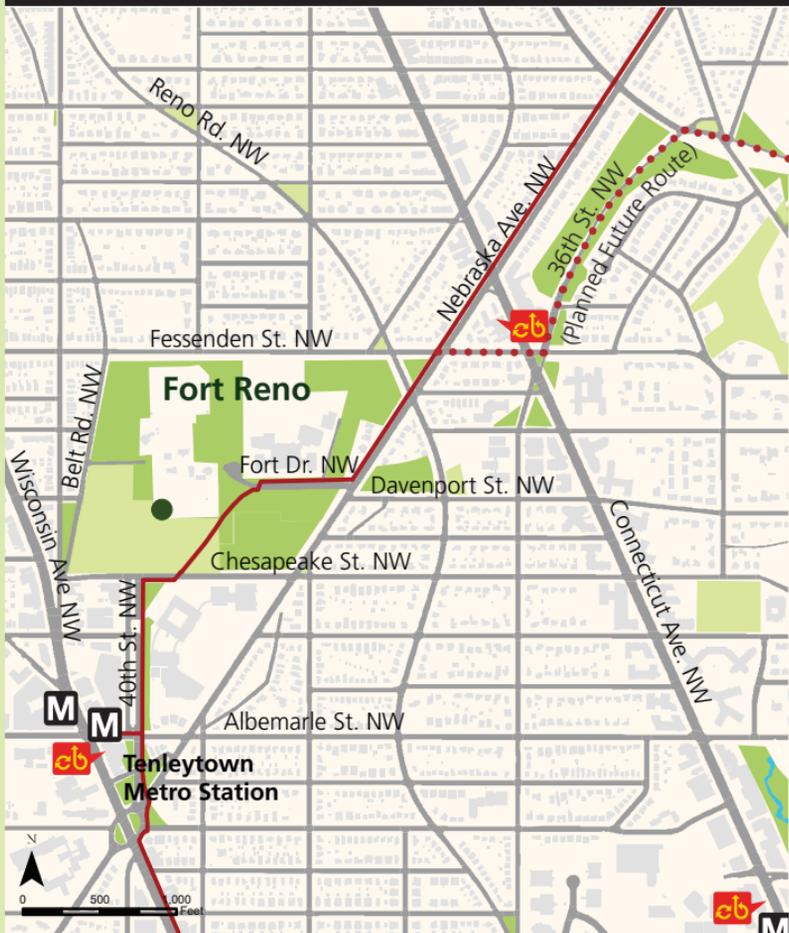
By 1864, Washington had become one of the most fortified cities in the world, with an encircling array of forts, batteries, and military roads. At the war's end, Barnard reported that the defenses of Washington included 68 enclosed forts and batteries, emplacements for 1,120 guns (with 807 guns and 98 mortars actually mounted), 93 unarmed batteries with 401 emplacements for field-guns, twenty miles of rifle trenches, three blockhouses, and thirty-two miles of military roads linking the defenses.



Library of Congress



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**Tenleytown Metro Station to Fort Reno** 0.4 mi

Exit the metro station toward Wisconsin Ave- east side

Continue straight from the metro exit on Albemarle St. NW 161 ft

Take the first left onto 40th St. NW 0.2 mi

Turn right onto Chesapeake St. NW 331 ft

Turn left onto gravel path to Fort Reno 0.1 mi

You have arrived at Fort Reno. See following pages for information

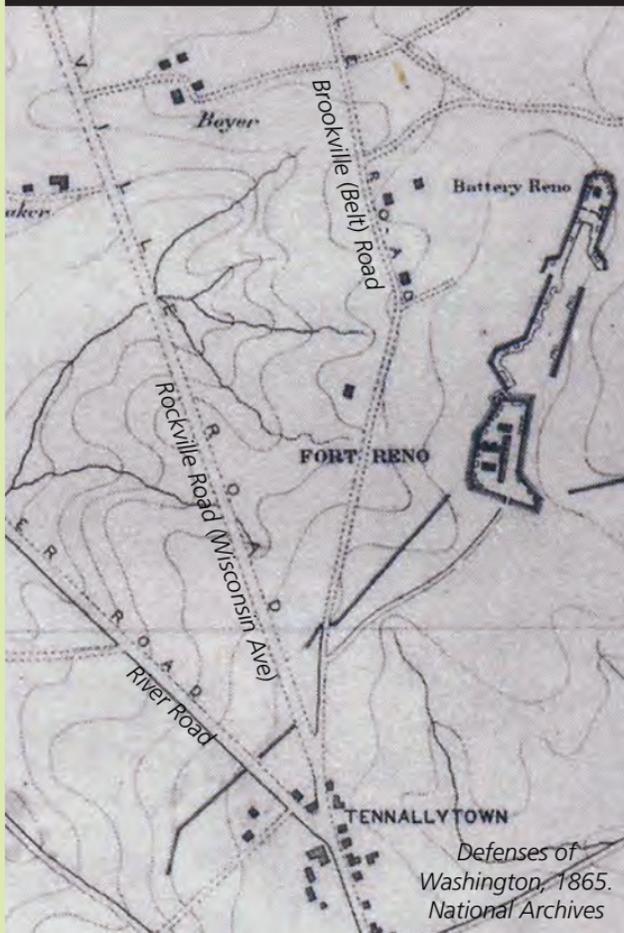
**Fort Reno to Fort DeRussy** 1.8 mi

Continue on gravel path through Ft. Reno

Turn right on Fort Dr. NW 0.1 mi

Turn left on Nebraska Ave. NW 0.7 mi

Directions continued on page 11



Originally named “Fort Pennsylvania,” Fort Reno was the stronghold of the northern circle of defensive forts. Renamed in 1863 after Major General Jesse Reno, the fort was built on the highest ground in Washington at 409 feet above sea level. The lethal long-range siege guns and Union communication tower were visible to Confederate troops and guarded the entrance to the city at the intersection of River Road, Rockville Road (now Wisconsin Ave), and Brookville (now Belt) Road in Tenleytown.

Battery Reno, at the northern end of Fort Reno, had an arsenal of 27 guns and mortars including siege and 24-pound howitzers, Parrott rifles, and Coehorn mortars. One of the shells fired from Fort Reno traveled 3.5 miles north, killing four Confederates. The fort was destroyed when the city built an underground water reservoir and tower on the site at the turn of the century.

After the war, the original fort and surrounding land was developed into Reno City, a modest community of African-American freedman and white families. During the 1920s through the 1940s, “urban renewal” transformed Reno City into a park and reservoir. Homes of many residents were condemned and they were forced to move to other parts of the city.





- ① Cultural Tourism DC's tour 'The Tenleytown Heritage Trail' begins here. It is a walking tour of this historic crossroads community.
- ② Notice the fire hydrants appearing throughout the park. They remain as evidence of post-war Reno City's infrastructure. There is no above-ground evidence of the Civil War fort.
- ③ This spot marks the highest natural elevation in Washington DC. Look for the marker on the ground designating this point.
- ④ Fort Reno reservoir tower is operated by DC Water. At one time, it could be seen from neighboring Virginia. During the Civil War, a Union signal tower took advantage of the same high ground. On June 11, 1864, Fort Reno was the first of the defenses to see Confederate General Jubal Early's army advancing on Fort Stevens.
- ⑤ Find the informational plaque on one of the walls of the historic Jesse Reno School, built in 1904 to serve the African-American children of Reno City.

Fort Reno to Fort DeRussy, con't 1.9 mi

From Nebraska Ave NW, turn right onto  
**Military Rd. NW** 0.8 mi

**To visit the nature center:**  
At the intersection with Glover Rd. NW  
and Oregon Ave NW, turn right into the  
paved **Western Ridge Trail** 0.1 mi

Take the first left to **Rock Creek Nature  
Center** (hours: Wed-Sun 9am-5pm) 138 ft

Exit straight out of Nature Center 138 ft

Turn right onto paved section of **Western  
Ridge Trail**, crossing **Military Rd. NW**  
and continuing on paved trail 0.2 mi

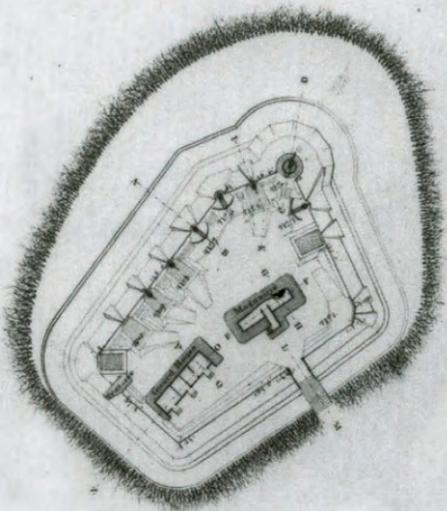
Take the first **right** at the Ft. DeRussy sign 125 ft

Go left at the fork onto a **dirt trail** 105 ft

Continue straight on dirt trail 0.1 mi

Fort DeRussy is on your left





Abatis (tree branches laid in a row and tied with wire, sharpened tips pointing outward)

Moat

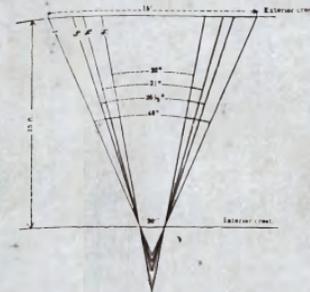
Gun Platform

Embrasure (protected opening from which a soldier is able to fire)

Parapet

Bombproof Magazine and  
Guard House

Sally Port



Field of Fire: Angle of fire of siege guns in embrasures.

*Mr. Lincoln's Forts: A Guide to the Civil War Defenses of Washington*

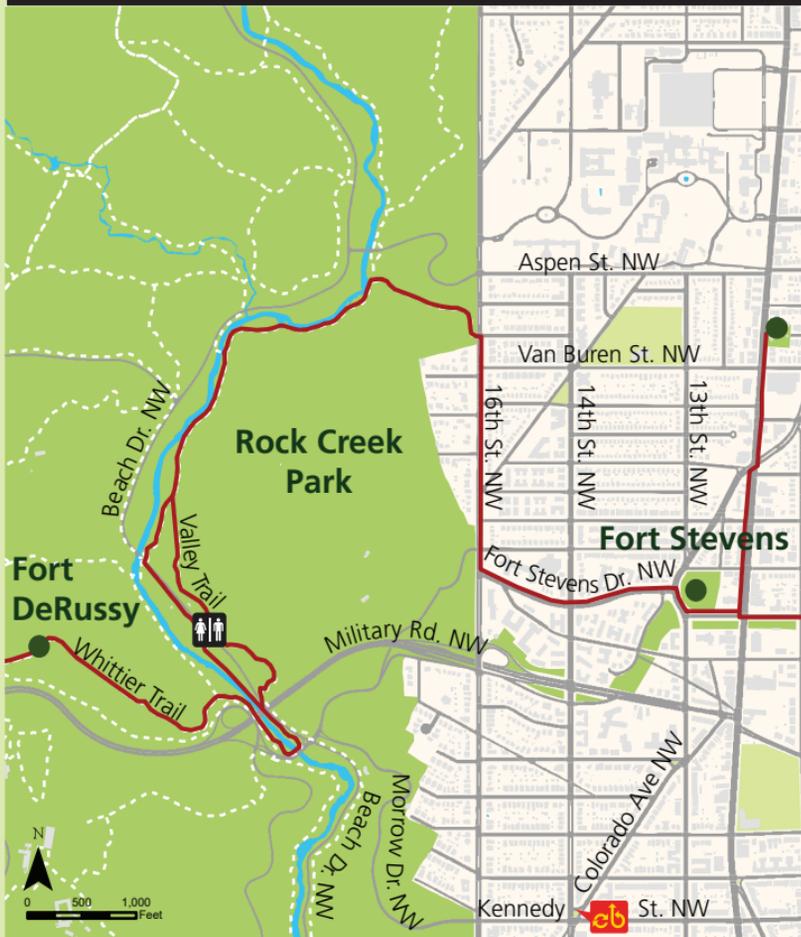
Fort DeRussy was a little over one-third the size of Fort Reno, with a perimeter of 190 feet. However, the engineered fieldworks would have provided a withering field of fire for any intruders. Today, Fort DeRussy's earthworks lie beneath the protective cover of mature trees. During the Civil War, this entire hillside was cleared to provide an unobstructed vantage point for guns sweeping the Rock Creek valley and Milkhouse Ford.

The defensive field fortifications for Washington, DC were designed with one clear objective in mind: creating an interlocking field of fire from commanding artillery positions in order to prevent a Confederate victory.

Each angle, slope, and feature of the earthwork's form contributed to this goal, as seen in this plan for Fort DeRussy. At a larger scale, the network of batteries, rifle pits, and roads linking the forts provided a chain of men and armaments capable of responding to any attack.



- ① Following the earthen trail to the fort, you will notice a large boulder bearing an National Park Service commemorative plaque.
- ② Directly behind the boulder is the entrance to the surviving earthworks. Look for the parapet walls and dry moat, which are still intact. Past the parapet walls are the surviving remnants of the fort's powder magazines, now visible as earthen mounds covered in vegetation.
- ③ Take a look at the different trees and other vegetation which now grow on the earthworks. Mature tree roots and fallen leaves hold soil and prevent earthworks from eroding. To make sure that trees do not fall over and destroy the earthworks, hazard trees are removed and younger trees are selectively allowed to grow to maintain the composition of the forest.



**Fort DeRussy to Fort Stevens** ~2.7 mi

Exit Fort DeRussy and turn **left** onto trail ~0.4 mi

Turn **right** at fork in trail ~120 ft

Turn **left** onto paved trail and follow as it curves left across Rock Creek and left along Beach Drive ~0.3 mi

Immediately after passing under bridge, **cross the road and enter Valley Trail** toward Riley Spring Bridge/Boundary Bridge, or a flatter hike, **continue on paved trail.** ~0.5 mi

If on paved trail, turn **right** onto **natural-surface trail** just before next bridge

If on valley trail, turn **right** at the T

Both routes follow the creek and pass a footbridge on the left. **Continue straight.** ~0.5 mi

At the signed junction, turn **right** on the **Whittier Trail** ~0.2 mi

Exit trail and turn **right** on **16th St. NW** 0.4 mi

Turn **left** onto **Fort Stevens Dr. NW** 0.4 mi

Fort Stevens is ahead of you.



*Library of Congress*



The only clash between Federal and Confederate troops in Washington, DC happened at Fort Stevens. This fort was built to defend the 7th St. Turnpike (Now Georgia Avenue). Led by General Jubal Early, the Confederate attack on Fort Stevens occurred on July 11-12th, 1864.

President Lincoln was standing on the fort's parapet wall to view the battle when a sharpshooter's bullet narrowly missed him. This was the only time in American history when a sitting president came under direct fire from an enemy combatant. In the end, Union forces repulsed the attack and Early withdrew his army.

The nearby community of Brightwood had been a home to freed African-Americans since the early 1820s, and African-American landowners such as Mrs. Elizabeth Thomas saw their farms transformed into the

defensive landscape of war. "Camp Brightwood," as the area was known, attracted fugitive slaves seeking refuge behind Union lines, who joined units of the US Colored Troops.

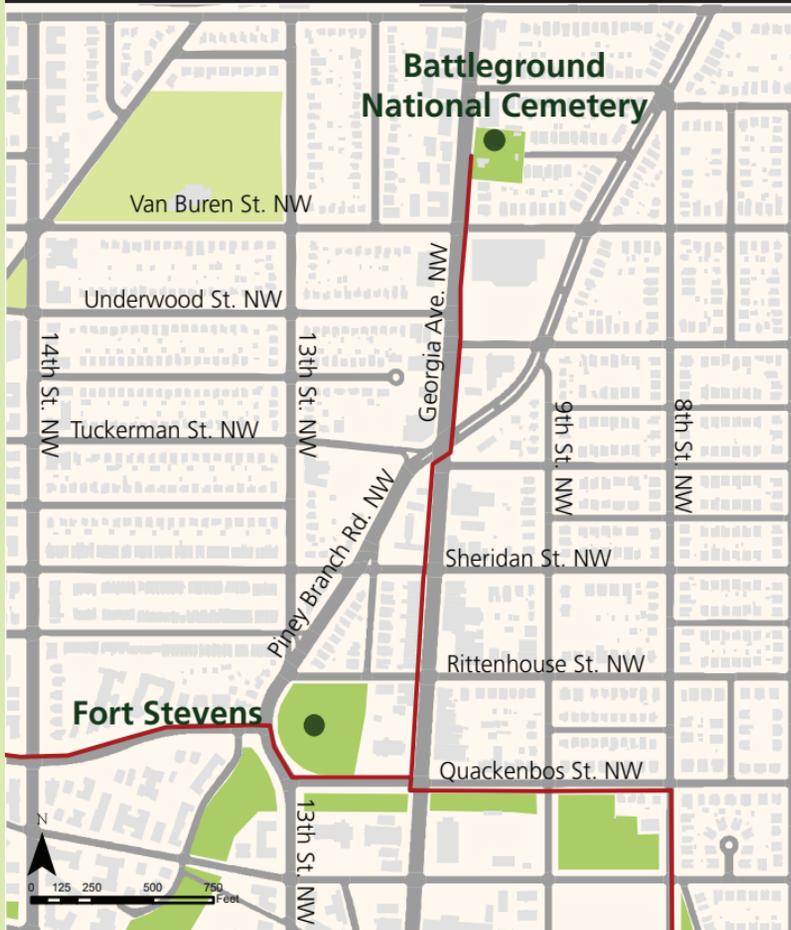
In 1933, Fort Stevens became a property of the National Park Service. Three years later, the Civilian Conservation Corps began a partial reconstruction of the fort as seen today, including the northern parapet wall with its revetments, embrasures, magazine, gun platforms, and ditch.



*Historical Society of Washington D.C.*



- ① Notice the concrete ‘logs’ that were used in the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC)-era reconstruction. The National Park Service recently repaired several of these pieces. Their material was designed to “weather” similarly to the CCC concrete logs.
- ② Located on one of the parapet walls of the fort is the commemorative stone dedicated to President Lincoln. Stand next to the stone and look northwest; the top of the former Walter Reed Army Medical Hospital is above the treeline a mile away. During the battle, Confederate sharpshooters perched in trees at the hospital were able to shoot as far south as the fort.
- ③ Next door stands the third Emory Church, built after the Civil War. The first church was founded in 1832. By mid-century, its congregation reflected the deep divide in religious communities over slavery and aligned with the South. However, by 1862, the church assisted Union troops expanding the fort and the church was dismantled by soldiers to construct the earthworks.
- ④ As a side trip, explore Cultural Tourism DC’s Brightwood Heritage Trail linking Fort Stevens to the stories of its historic community.



**Fort Stevens to Battleground National Cemetery and back** 1 mi

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Turn left onto Quackenbos St. NW 463 ft

Turn left on Georgia Ave. NW, crossing Piney Branch Rd. NW and Van Buren St. NW 0.5 mi

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**Battleground National Cemetery is on your right**

Turn left out of the cemetery on Georgia Ave NW, crossing Piney Branch Rd. NW 0.5 mi

Turn left on Quackenbos St. NW

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Continue on page 19

The site for Battleground National Cemetery— half a mile north of Fort Stevens— was selected by Union Quartermaster General Montgomery C. Meigs, who also designated Arlington Cemetery. His vision of the national cemetery as a memorial landscape was repeated at battlefields throughout the south.

President Lincoln dedicated the cemetery shortly after the July 1864 Battle of Fort Stevens. The

two-day battle marked the defeat of the Confederate General Jubal Early's offensive campaign against Washington. Over 900 men were killed or wounded during the conflict, and 40 Union soldiers who died while defending Fort Stevens were interred here. The 41st and last burial of a Union veteran took place in 1936 (pictured bottom right).

The center of the cemetery is marked by a flagpole, and the marble headstones are replacements for the earliest headstones, which were made of wooden planks.

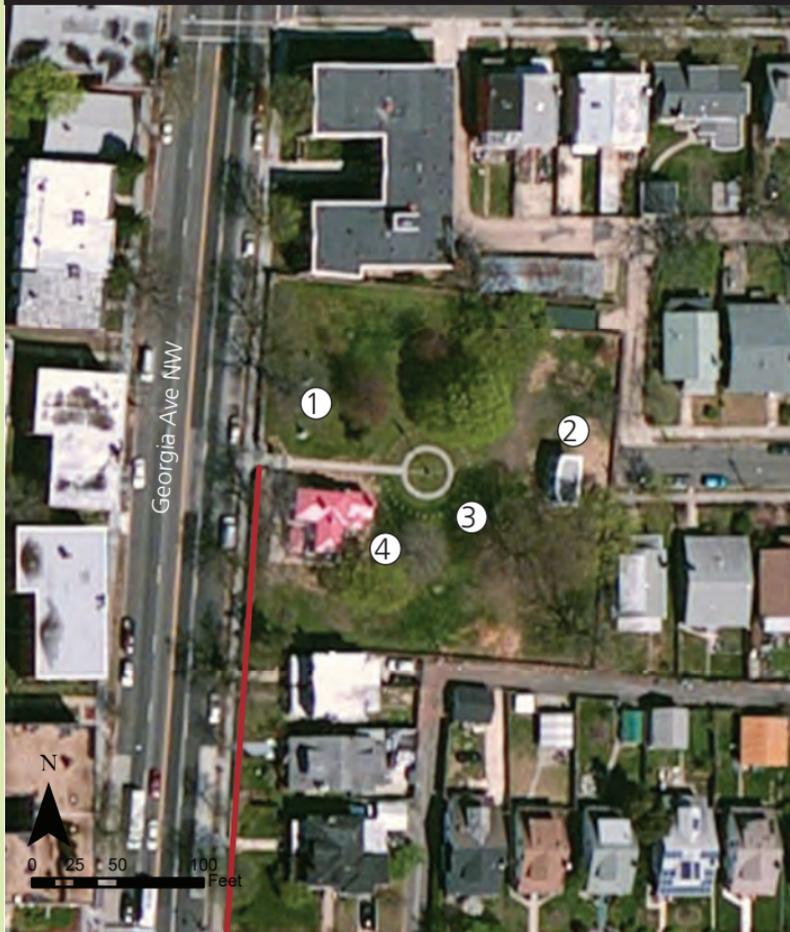
Behind the headstones, a marble rostrum is used to conduct yearly Memorial Day services. The four granite pillars are in memory of the four volunteer companies who fought at Fort Stevens.



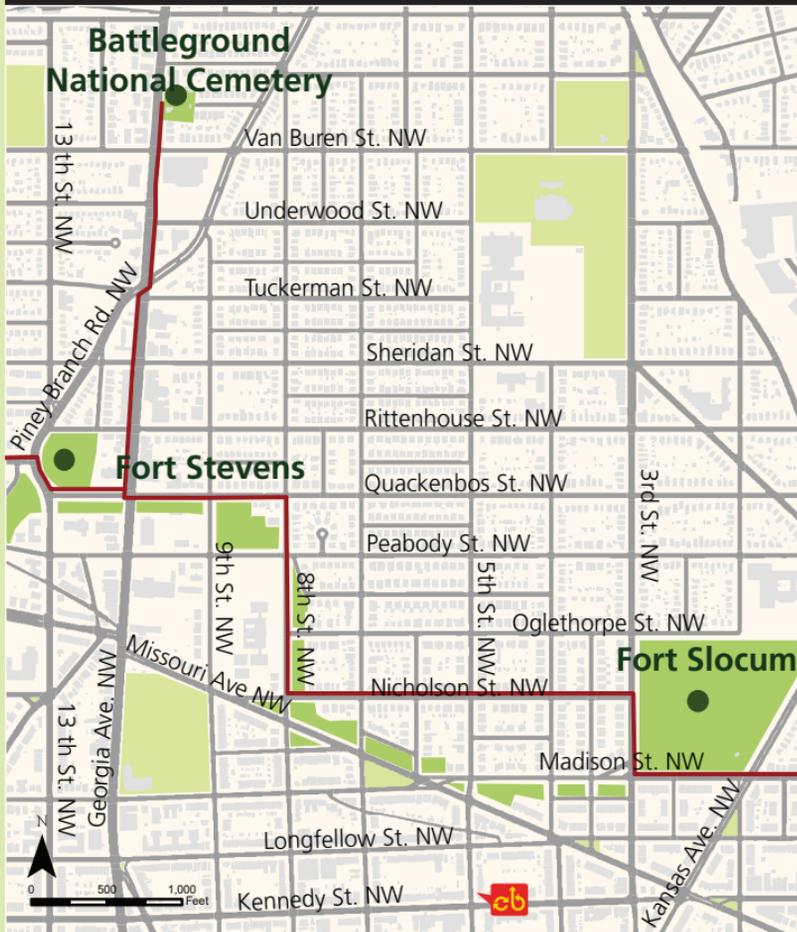
*Library of Congress*



*National Archives*



- ① Facing Georgia Avenue are four regimental monuments commemorating units engaged in the Battle of Fort Stevens. Read the various dedications on the monuments.
- ② Built as a stage for commemorative events, the rostrum was dedicated on Memorial Day, 1921.
- ③ A series of cast-iron markers outside the circle of headstones captures the words of Theodore O'Hara's famous poem, 'The Bivouac of the Dead,' originally written in memory of those who died during the Mexican War (1846-48).
- ④ Note the beautiful native Seneca sandstone used to build the cemetery superintendent's lodge, designed by Gen. Meigs. Built in 1871, the lodge replaced an earlier single-story wooden structure. The building was restored by the National Park Service in 2011 and now serves as park offices.



Fort Stevens to Fort Slocum

1.2 mi

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 Head east on Quackenbos St. NW 0.3 mi

Turn right onto 8th St. NW 0.3 mi

Turn left onto Nicholson Ave. NW 0.4 mi

Turn right onto 3rd St. NW 0.1 mi

Turn left onto Madison St. NW 0.1 mi

Fort Slocum is on your left

Named for Colonel John Slocum, who was killed in 1861 at the First Battle of Manassas, Fort Slocum was constructed by the 2<sup>nd</sup> Rhode Island Infantry. With its 25 guns and mortars, the fort commanded the intersection of the left and right forks of Rock Creek Church Road (Near today's New Hampshire Ave. and McDonald Place NE; see map on page 22). Its range also included the defense of Fort Stevens to the west; the opening shots of the 1864 battle were fired from here.

The only remaining evidence of Fort Slocum is an eroded field gun battery site and line of rifle pits. Look at the map on the next page to see the original fort layout and location on a contemporary map. The main fort structure was located where there is now a residential neighborhood.



*Library of Congress*

Fort Slocum was home to white soldiers and the African American foot soldiers of the 4th U.S. Colored Infantry from Baltimore, a regiment comprised of both freedmen and escaped slaves. President Lincoln authorized the unit in June 1863 after giving the Emancipation Proclamation.



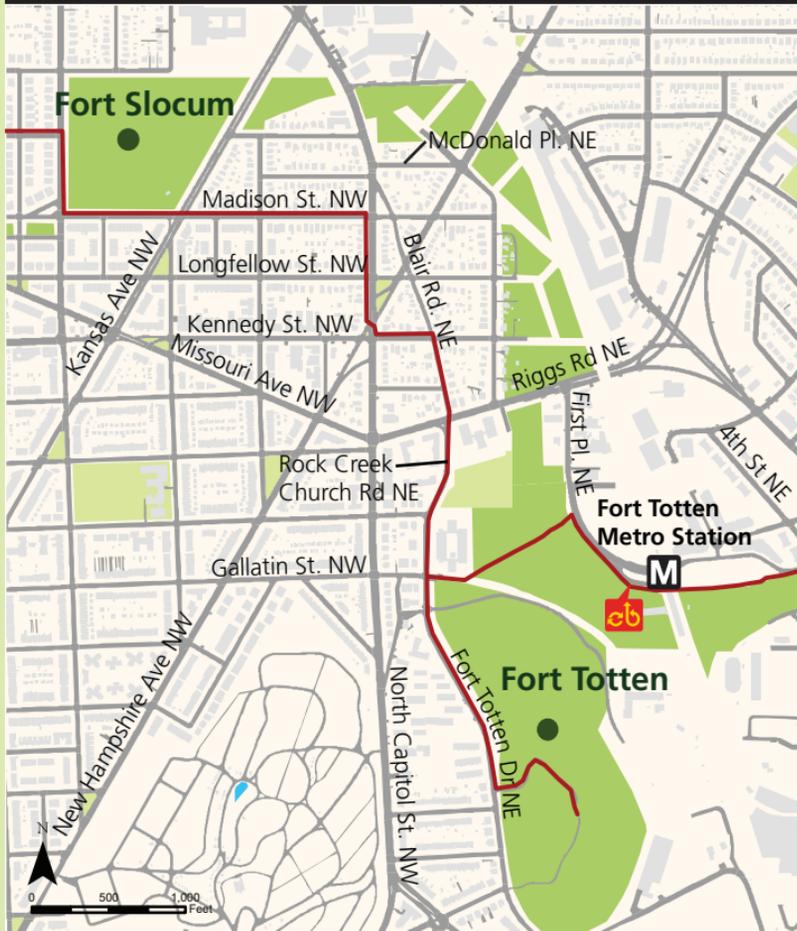
*Library of Congress*

The soldier family shown above was encamped with the 31st PA Infantry at Queen's Farm in the vicinity of Fort Slocum. Some wives insisted on staying with their husbands during the war. In addition to taking care of her family, this woman may have worked as a camp laundress or nurse (Library of Congress annotation).



- ① You will need to use your imagination at this site, since only remnants of a parapet exist. Note the topography of the site, which culminates in a rise toward the preserved areas. As you climb to the location of the picnic pavilion, you will see a very different panorama from the historic photo below of the 31st PA camp at the surrounding farmland. Both the elevation of the site and the open, 360-degree views of the landscape were key elements in the construction of defensive earthworks such as Fort Slocum. How has the view changed from the days of the Civil War?





**Fort Slocum to Fort Totten** 1.1 mi

Continue east on **Madison St. NW** 0.2 mi

Turn **right** onto **North Capitol St.** 0.1 mi

Turn **left** to cross **North Capitol St.** at **Kennedy St.**

Continue east on **Kennedy St. NE** 400 ft

Turn **right** on **Blair Rd. NE** 0.1 mi

Cross **Riggs Rd. NE** and continue on **Rock**

**Creek Church Rd. NE** 0.1 mi

Continue on **Fort Totten Dr. NE** 0.4 mi

**Fort Totten is on your left up the gravel drive**

**Directions from Fort Totten to Fort Totten** 0.6 mi

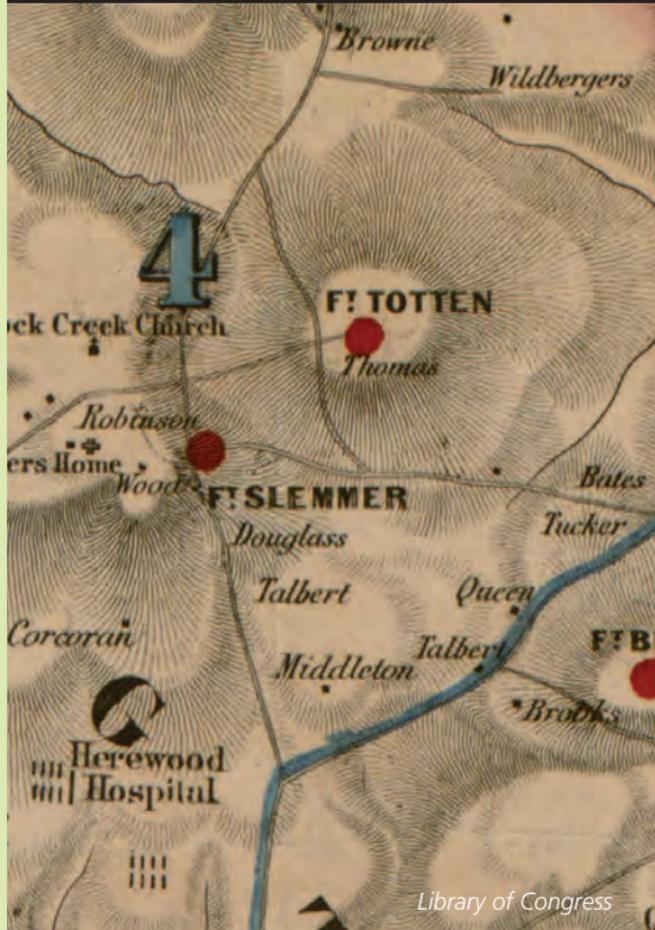
**Metro Station**

Turn **right** out of **Fort Totten** onto **Fort Totten Dr. NE** 0.3 mi

Turn **right** on **Gallatin St. NE** and follow **paved trail** across field 0.2 mi

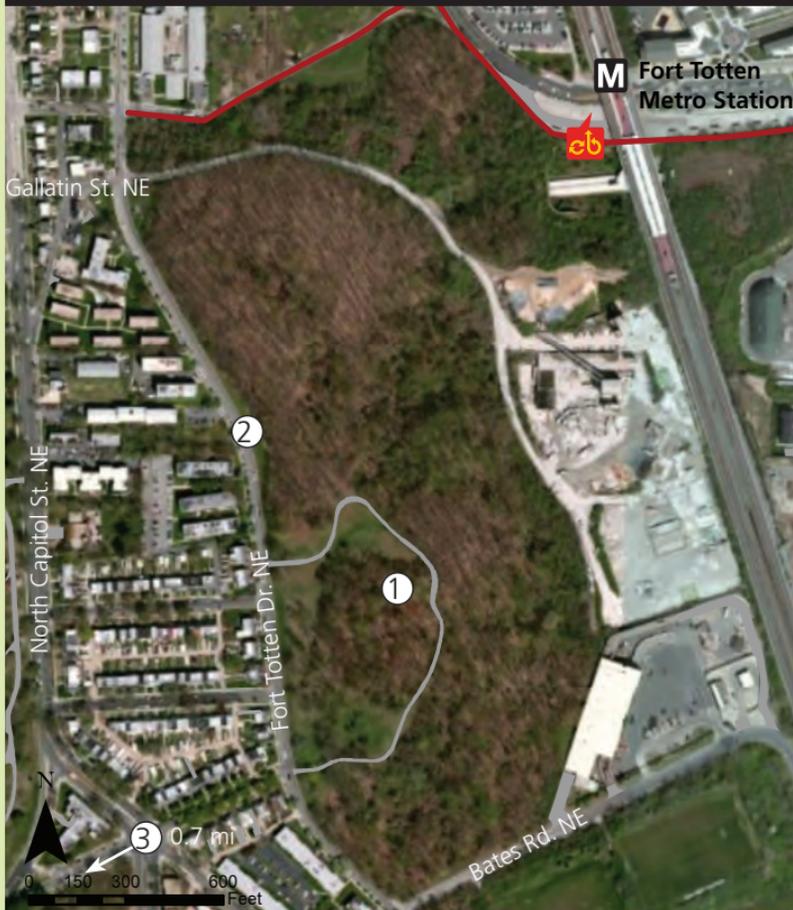
Turn **right** on **First Pl. NE** (no sign) and **continue to metro station** 0.1 mi

**Fort Totten Metro Station is ahead of you**



Fort Totten was constructed in 1862 on another topographic high point. It had an extensive field of fire guarding the approach to the US Soldiers Home (US Military Asylum), which then served as President Lincoln's summer home. Fort Totten's artillery consisted of 20 mounted guns and mortars, including eight 32-pounders. The 100 pounder Parrott rifle provided long-range support to Fort Stevens during the Confederate attack on July 11-12, 1864.

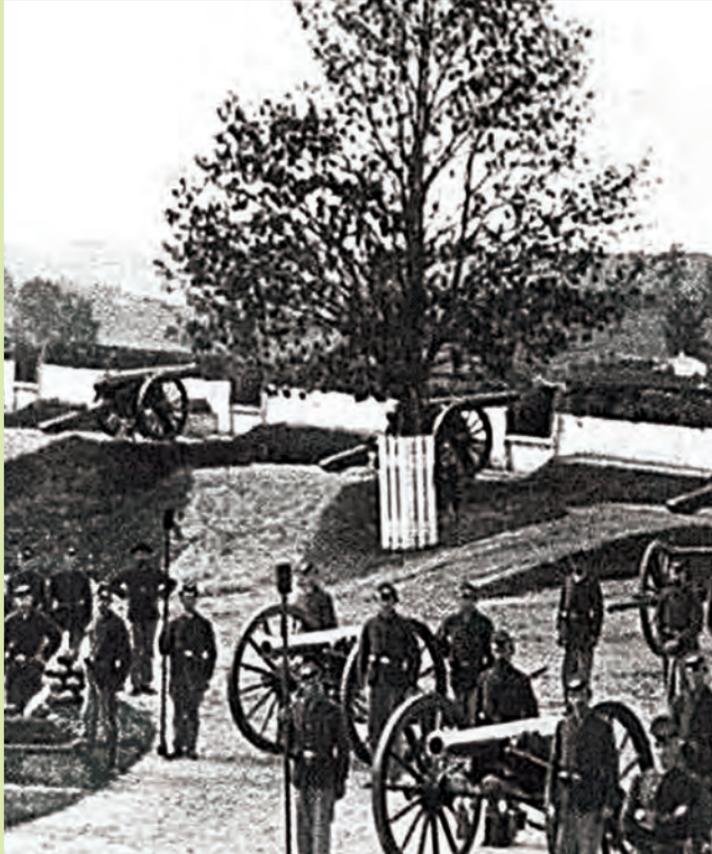
Entrances to the forts were designated by main gates. Today, visitors and residents pass through a different kind of entrance near the original fort site: The Fort Totten Metro station.



- ① Follow the gravel access road adjacent to the Fort Totten interpretive sign. In the wooded area at the top of the hill and to the right of the road, look for the parapet walls and dry moat. Beyond the walls and moat are earthen mounds that are the remains of the bombproof, an underground chamber protected by earth over a timber roof.
- ② Compare the drawing here with the historic map on the previous page. Can you see the resemblance between today's Fort Totten Drive and the military road shown on the earlier map?
- ③ Consider taking a 0.7-mile side trip to the Lincoln Cottage, operated by the National Trust for Historic Preservation. The Lincoln family lived at the US Soldiers' Home during June-November of the years 1862, 1863, and 1864. This 'military asylum' was built on the third highest spot in the city in 1851, and served to care for disabled and retired veterans. The powerful guns atop the hill at Fort Totten helped to guard Lincoln's frequent commutes from the White House to his family's residence here.



The Civil War Defenses of Washington Trail is part of a network of trails and routes recognized, collectively, as the Potomac Heritage National Scenic Trail. The trail corridor embraces earlier visions to connect the Potomac River with the forks of the Ohio River beyond the western mountains. Today, visitors can explore a variety of contrasting landscapes on foot, bicycle, horse, and boat.



**For Additional Information:**

**American Hiking Society:** [www.americanhiking.org](http://www.americanhiking.org)

**Capital Bikeshare:** <https://www.capitalbikeshare.com/>

**Civil War Defenses of Washington:** [www.nps.gov/cwdw](http://www.nps.gov/cwdw)

**Cooling, B.F III. and W. H. Owen II. Mr. Lincoln's Forts:**

*A Guide to the Civil War Defenses of Washington. Laham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, Inc, 2010*

**Cultural Tourism DC:** [www.culturaltourismdc.org](http://www.culturaltourismdc.org)

**Fort Stevens Podcast:**

[www.nps.gov/rocr/photosmultimedia/multimedia.htm](http://www.nps.gov/rocr/photosmultimedia/multimedia.htm)

**Metro Rail and Metrobus:** [www.wmata.com](http://www.wmata.com)

**Potomac Heritage National Scenic Trail Hiker's Guide:**

[www.nps.gov/pohe/planyourvisit](http://www.nps.gov/pohe/planyourvisit)

**Sources:**

*GIS Aerial Photo Basemap Source: Esri, DigitalGlobe, GeoEye, i-cubed, USDA, USGS, AEX, Getmapping, Aerogrid, IGN, IGP, swisstopo, and the GIS User Community*

