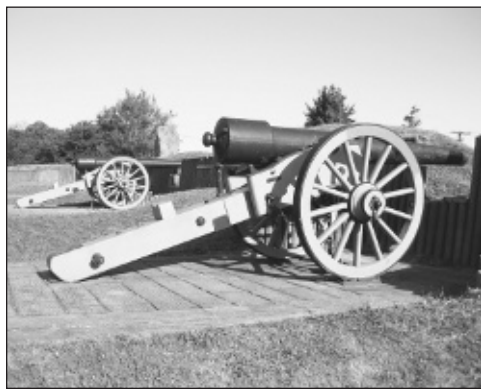


“We Scared Abe Lincoln like Hell” Historical Geography in the D.C. Region

In the coming months, “Focus on the D.C. Region” will highlight various geographic aspects of the city and the surrounding region in anticipation of the 2010 AAG Annual Meeting, which will be held April 14-18, 2010 at the Marriott Wardman Park and Omni Shoreham Hotels in Washington, D.C. The conference website is available at www.aag.org.annualmeetings. For the annual meeting call for papers see pages 16-17, this issue.

It would not be surprising if we found that most people's first thoughts of things to see and do in Washington, D.C. involved visits to prominent historical sites such as the Washington Monument, the White House, the Lincoln Memorial, and nearby Mount Vernon. However, much like Philadelphia and Boston, the city of Washington and its surrounding region is also home to hundreds of lesser-known sites of historical and geographical significance. Less conspicuous than their more famous cousins, these places are often nestled quietly into the fabric of the everyday life of the city, its neighborhoods and those of surrounding towns.



Cannon sit overlooking a quiet residential neighborhood in Washington, D.C., relics of the only Civil War battle to take place in the federal capital.



Battleground National Cemetery is just a short walk from Fort Stevens. Photographs by Jim Ketchum.

One such site is Fort Stevens, the location of Washington, D.C.'s only Civil War battle. Positioned inconspicuously at the corner of 13th and Quackenbos streets in Northwest Washington, near Silver Spring, the fort is today part of the federal park system and a stop on the African American Heritage Trail. Cannon sit at the earthen ramparts, overlooking a quiet, unassuming neighborhood of simple streets and houses to the north and northwest.

Fort Stevens was constructed in 1862 on land seized from Elizabeth Proctor Thomas, a free black woman and a farmer. A key component of a line of fortifications that stretched to Fort Totten (today a stop on the DC Metro), Fort Stevens defended approaches to the capital from the Seventh Street Pike (now Georgia Avenue), then the main thoroughfare from the north into the capital.

On July 11-12, 1864, Confederate Lieutenant General Jubal Early led the Second Corps of the Army of Northern Virginia in an attack which has come to be known as the Battle of Fort Stevens. Under the direction of General Robert E. Lee, the maneuver was largely intended to draw federal troops away from the Union effort to take Richmond, the Confederate capital, which it accomplished.

The arrival of Confederate troops on the outskirts of Washington, D.C. on July 11 threw the city into a state of alarm and the leaders of the defenses – all generals who had either been relieved of their battlefield commands or forced to withdraw due to injury or illness – into a panic. Emergency measures were put in place to organize the home guards, clerks, and convalescent troops manning the defenses until troops sent by General Ulysses S. Grant could arrive to bolster the line.

President Abraham Lincoln personally travelled to the battlefield to

survey the scene and drew fire while standing in a parapet at Fort Stevens. Confederate sharpshooters later remarked that they had seen Lincoln's trademark hat above the battlements and quickly took aim. Early withdrew his forces after encountering heavy resistance from Grant's troops but was later quoted as saying, “We didn't take Washington, but we scared Abe Lincoln like Hell.”

The Battle of Fort Stevens is also remembered as the only time in American history that two former opponents in a presidential election faced each other under fire across enemy lines: Major General John C. Breckinridge, former U.S. vice president and one of Lincoln's opponents in the presidential election of 1860, was one of the Confederate officers under Jubal Early's command during the battle.

The battlefield cemetery (Battleground National Cemetery) is located nearby, at 6625 Georgia Avenue NW. Fort Stevens is free and open to the public in an ungated park setting. Field trip proposals for the 2010 AAG Annual Meeting are currently being sought. For details, see page 4. ■

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A plaque at the site commemorates the moment a U.S. Army surgeon was shot and wounded while standing next to President Abraham Lincoln during the Battle of Fort Stevens.