

## **CIVIL WAR COMES TO "TAKOMA PARK"**

This year is the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Battle of Ft. Stevens. Join the commemoration of these momentous events on July 10-12, 2014 at Ft, Stevens. A complete calendar of events and locations can be found at [www.dccivilwarforts.org](http://www.dccivilwarforts.org)

A brief summary of the events of July 1864 follows:

150 years ago this summer, Abraham Lincoln was President and the nation had been fighting a bitter civil war for three years. War was about to come to the land we now call Takoma Park.

The South was desperate by June of 1864. Northern troops had pinned down the Confederates at Petersburg. General Robert E. Lee tried a daring plan – he sent 10,000 soldiers to attack Washington, DC. Under Gen Jubal Early they circled west of Washington, crossing into Maryland on July 5, headed toward Montgomery County.

After extorting ransom from both Hagerstown and Frederick, Rebel forces reached the Monocacy River on July 9 to find Union troops blocking the bridges. The defenders couldn't stop the Confederates, but they delayed the advance for one day.

Meanwhile the temperatures that July were hitting 100 degrees every day. The weary Rebel soldiers in their woolen uniforms, carrying weapons and backpacks of supplies, continued trudging toward President Lincoln's capital.

The first units reached Silver Spring on July 11. This was not the Silver Spring we know today with its stores and restaurants. Silver Spring was a large mansion owned by Francis Preston Blair, friend and advisor to President Lincoln. His son, Montgomery Blair, lived in his own mansion nearby. A small post office and not much more stood at the small crossroads of today's Georgia and Colesville. By now, the ranks of Confederate soldiers were tired and hot and made camp wherever they could, many of them on the grounds of the two Blair mansions.

The front lines of soldiers advanced on Ft. Steven, two miles ahead, crossing through land that would become Takoma Park 20 years in the future. In 1864 it was open land, with a few farms and lots of scrub trees.

Fort Stevens was one of 68 forts constructed to protect Washington DC. On this day in July, the Fort was ready, but there were very few Union soldiers available. Most of them were stationed at other battlefields (especially Petersburg) leaving only old retired soldiers, new recruits and those recovering from battle wounds to defend the Capital against the pending attack.

As the two sides faced each other over the low walls of the fort, a Rebel sharpshooter climbed a tree for a bird-eye view. At one point he saw a gentleman with a top hat standing at the wall

gauging the situation. The marksman fired his rifle, striking a soldier standing next to the tall man. The man in the top hat was President Lincoln, and he took cover after his narrow escape.

The Confederate plan did not quite go as intended. Although General Early had arrived at Ft. Stevens by noon on July 11, he realized his men were strung out for miles behind him, and too tired to attack. Faraway in Petersburg, Gen. Grant finally reacted to the threat, frantically sending reinforcements up the Potomac River. Thanks to the delay at Monocacy River, they arrived in time to fill the ranks at Ft. Stevens and the other battlements.

When dawn arrived on July 12, Gen. Early realized he could not capture the fort after all, and sounded the retreat; his men began heading back the way they had come, through Montgomery County. During the retreat, Montgomery Blair's house was burned to the ground, but his father's house at Silver Spring was left unharmed. The threat was over.

Sometimes history is the story was what didn't happen. President Lincoln did not die from sniper fire at Ft. Stevens. The Confederates did not capture Washington. And General Lee finally surrendered in April the following year. But the place that would become Takoma Park had a front row seat to what almost was.

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