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## Civil War History in Takoma Park's Front and Back Yards

By Elizabeth M. Bentley

General Jubal Early and his Confederate Raiders are closing in on their goal after a month's campaign. The summer day is hot and muggy; it has been 41 days without rain. The road is dusty, the Confederate troops tired and hungry from a major battle, skirmishes, and the long trek from Gaithersburg.

Marching through Leesborough area (later renamed Wheaton to honor General Frank Wheaton, U.S. Volunteers), their goal is Fort Stevens, just inside the District of Columbia boundary. They approach Fort Stevens along Seventh Street Pike (present day Georgia Avenue). The lines are ragged, and the men, suffering from extreme heat exhaustion and thirst, begin to collapse along the wayside.

Fort Stevens is one of the ring of fortifications built to safeguard Washington, D.C. during the Civil War. It lies on nearly the same rise of ground overlooking the district which later attracted B. F. Gilbert to develop Takoma Park's first subdivision.

Nearby the Blair family holds land close to several local springs including one they named Silver Spring. Montgomery Blair's mansion is a refuge from downtown Washington for family and distinguished friends during summer's sultry and health threatening days. Also nearby is the residence and farm of Francis Preston Blair. All the Blairs have either retired to the seashore or gone fishing to escape the heat.

July 10, 1864, and Union troops are being hastily gathered together from the few able bodied men left in the nation's capital where consternation if not panic reigns. Their hope is delaying the reported advance of Confederate General Jubal Early's men against the capital long enough for reinforcements to arrive.



July 11, 1864, dawns hotter than before. By noon Early decides his troops who are now in direct proximity to the fort are too exhausted and too few in number to mount a serious attack. He does not realize there are less than 300 men standing guard inside Fort Stevens. Alerted by lookouts posted at Forts Totten and Reno that a cloud of brown dust kicked up by the thousands of soldier's feet is clearly visible, President Abraham Lincoln rides over from his nearby summer residence at Anderson Cottage for a look. Some small skirmishing takes place but Early fears trapping his men within the city by Union reinforcements. Early retreats to Blair Mansion

for the night where he may have drowned his dream of capturing the Union capital and its treasure of gold and munitions in overindulgent imbibing from the Blair Mansion wine cellar.

As July 12, 1864, opens, General Early ponders the fate of his drive against Washington. Having failed the day before to press the attack against Fort Stevens, and by now realizing Union reinforcements have arrived to protect the city, he pauses. There is light skirmishing as Union troops take command of the ground in front of Fort Stevens and in late afternoon there is a Union charge which leaves many men dead or wounded. A cemetery is hastily established for the Union dead. Sixteen men are buried in a circle around a flagpole. (Battlefield National Cemetery near present day Piney Branch and Georgia Avenue.)

Skirmishes slowing his way, Jubal and his troops retreat north along Seventh Street Pike leaving many wounded and dead behind. The bodies of the Confederate soldiers are gathered from the road and buried at nearby Grace Episcopal Church in the Woodside area on Seventh Street Pike. The Confederate threat to occupy Washington is over. During the remaining years of the Civil War, no other military activity comes as close to the city as did General Jubal Early and his troops.

After the Civil War, and before the town of Takoma Park existed, military officers from both sides settle on farms in the area. Union General Samuel Spriggs Carroll has a farm near the center of town with a large residence on Manor Circle. The Blair family cultivates land close to the District line on its farms, General Riggs has a summer home near what is now Prince George's Plaza and former Confederate officer Cockerill settles near present day New Hampshire Avenue. The bullets never whizzed through Takoma Park but the Civil War experience is recorded in six street names: Lincoln, Lee, Sherman, Grant, Sheridan, and Carroll.

Longtime Takoma Park resident Dorothy Barnes remembers visiting often the caretaker's residence at Battlefield National Cemetery where a schoolmate lived in the caretaker's house. Caretaking at Battlefield Cemetery was a dying business as only Union veterans of the Fort Stevens conflict were eligible for burial at the cemetery. Dorothy also relates with wry humor the story of General Carroll refusing to let a neighbor's children (Cockerills) into his large apple orchard near Rittenhouse and Third Streets in the District because their father fought on the wrong side. General Carroll's house was a Takoma Park fixture as late as the 1950s.

Today there are nearly a dozen marked sites commemorating Civil War events that occurred within a three mile radius of Takoma Park and Silver Spring. They receive few visitors and remain virtually unknown and rarely visited.

Visiting the sites which are part of our greater neighborhood history is easy. Most likely you may be the only one talking with the muse of history while there. With the exception of the Georgia Avenue sites, one may visit at almost any time as traffic will not be troublesome. At Anderson Cottage one will need to make visit arrangements made ahead

of time. Perhaps you will feel excitement and a touch of melancholy for all the men who fought nearly 140 years ago to preserve their vision of what a republic should be.

You may want to take along drinking water if you will be going in early July. Better yet, go with nothing and perhaps experience for yourself in a very small way conditions faced by the Confederate soldier in his march across Montgomery county the second week of July 1864.

First, the forts: Fort Stevens, Fort Slocum, and Fort Totten. A series of some 68 enclosed fortifications and batteries were constructed around the perimeter of the district and across the river in Virginia to protect Washington and its inhabitants against Confederate attack. A total of 807 cannon and 98 mortars were finally mounted before the end of the war. We are fortunate that efforts to preserve the earthworks years ago have saved enough so we may imagine them as once used in defense of Washington.

Looking outward to the north, east, and west, all three forts occupy the highest points of land in the area. Visibility and protection was enhanced by felling a swath of trees a mile wide outside each fort. Open vistas existed then as they do not today because much of the countryside was large tracts of open farmland and fields. Roads were few, narrow and rutted. Perhaps fewer than six farms occupied the land area where the city of Takoma Park would eventually be developed.

1. Begin at Fort Stevens, largest of all the forts to surround the city. Easiest access is going north on 13th street from its intersection with Military Road. Today the fort occupies a hilltop along with Emory United Methodist Church, formerly the oldest American Methodist Episcopal church in the district, and where Fort Stevens was built on foundation of an earlier church. Stand on its ramparts and see if you can spot the grounds of present day Walter Reed Army Medical Center, from which sharpshooters' deadly gunfire picked off soldiers guarding the fort about a half mile away.

It is here that President Lincoln came on July 12, 1864, to evaluate the military situation and in the process endangered his life. Tall and an easily visible target in his high stovepipe hat, Lincoln probably put himself in mortal danger by climbing to the earthwork's outer rim. This is the only time in American history that a President has "stood under hostile fire."



Washington citizens also came to learn what was happening. Long skirts, sunbonnets, and all, they picked their way through the melee of impending battle to what must have been a sobering experience. With a bit more certainty it is reported that some time later in the day, a member of Lincoln's cabinet suggested Lincoln take a closer look at

the rebel soldiers. He is said to have replied, "My impression is that if I am where I can see the rebels, they are where they can see me."

2. The other forts involved in defense of Washington against General Jubal Early and his men include Fort Slocum and Fort Totten, and further west, Fort deRussy. Presence of the other forts augmented and assisted the Fort Stevens defense.

Fort Slocum lies southeast of Fort Stevens (within Kansas, Third, Olgethorpe, and Madison Streets) and occupies a lesser height. Other than a National Park Service marker and a picnic table or two, little remains to be seen today but it is worth the visit so one may better visualize its important firepower as backup to Fort Stevens. It is impressive open space in a city landscape.

Fort Totten, near the U.S. Soldiers' and Airmen's Home, and Rock Creek Cemetery, is further around to the east, and occupies a commanding height. Take the circular one way road opposite Allison Street (south on North Capitol, east on Riggs one block, right on Fort Totten Drive) into the park site and take time to stop for the view. As the road then passes into the trees, there is a surprising encounter with the fort as it once would have been even though now partially obscured by a young forest.

Below Fort Totten and adjacent to Rock Creek Cemetery and St. Paul's Church are Anderson Cottage on the grounds of the U.S. Soldiers' and Airmen's Home, and the Soldiers' Home National Cemetery (North Capitol to Rock Creek Church Road, left on Harewood Road).

Fort deRussy's guns protected the Rock Creek valley and Fort Stevens' western flank from its 86 acre complex of barracks, stables and guard house. Take Military Road (its name does indeed come from its use during the Civil War) west to Oregon and turn right. Trails lead through woods to overgrown earthworks. Across Military Road is the Rock Creek Park Nature Center, which has brochures and information about the Civil War sites.

3. Anderson Cottage predates 1851 establishment of the U.S. Soldiers' and Airmen's Home by General Winfield Scott. Built by the Riggs family, the "Gothic Revival" stucco house occupies the highest elevation on the former 500 acre estate where its view of the Capital across open fields sliding gently downward toward the city must have been stunning. It remains as obscure and private a space today as it was then. It is one of those places where one wishes "if only the walls could talk, the tales they might relate," in this case most of all about President Lincoln who retreated there to escape and ponder the horrors of the Civil War he faced each day.

Enlarged over the years and reincarnated as dormitory, offices, summer retreat for three U.S. presidents, and today nearly empty but for a few desks and use of first floor rooms as offices, Anderson Cottage was borrowed each summer by Lincoln during his presidency. There he completed his final draft of the Emancipation Proclamation in a corner room on the second floor. Outside the house, on the northwest side is an enormous

and ancient tree, a copper beech inside whose canopy Lincoln's son Todd played and climbed. Perhaps benign neglect of the cottage was purposeful in saving its restoration and its story until now. To visit Anderson Cottage call a day or so in advance for gate clearance to enter the grounds (202-722-3556).

Casualties from the battle of Fort Stevens were taken to a hospital on the grounds of the Soldiers' Asylum as it was then called. While visiting the cottage, take time to learn the story of the Soldiers' and Airmen's Home, and enjoy its extensive grounds and quiet pastoral setting in the midst of the city. In concept and operation the home is unique within the military system, a refuge belonging to retired soldiers and officers with 20 or more years of service. One leaves feeling humbled by inhabitants of the home and somewhat troubled that so much history remains obscure and unsung behind the Home's gated fence.

4. Soldiers' Home National Cemetery began with six acres donated by the Military Asylum in 1861. Faced with growing Civil War casualties, the government needed an appropriate cemetery site. By 1864, 5000 men had been interred, and it was full. The U.S. government then opened Arlington National Cemetery. Near the main gate at the corner of Church and Harewood Roads is the mausoleum of Major General John A. Logan whose leadership helped establish the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR) which became the premier Civil War veterans organization for Union veterans. Logan's General Order No. 11 (and whose text is on a ceremonial plaque outside the mausoleum) led to the custom of honoring soldiers' graves each May. It is open 8 am to 5 pm daily.

Seventh Street Road (later Georgia Avenue) at the time of the Civil War was an eight foot wide road bearing south from Leesborough (Wheaton) through open fields and small forests surrounding the sparse settlement of Sligo (now the center of Silver Spring) and on past the three Blair family summer homes and several farms inside the district line. It was one of two principal roads entering Washington from a northerly direction. Users paid tolls at various points including one at the intersection of Georgia Avenue and Colesville Road.

5. The easiest way to visit the Civil War sites along Georgia Avenue is traveling from south to north (begin two blocks south of Missouri Avenue intersection at Longfellow Street). The first stop is approximately where a yellow frame house built in 1840 and used as a dressing station during the Fort Stevens fight once stood at number 5759. The Emery House was also used throughout the war as a signal station for communication between the fort and the city. Auxiliary batteries to Fort Stevens were placed in area near Quackenbos and Olgethorpe streets.

6. At 6625 Georgia Avenue is Battlefield National Cemetery, the smallest of our national cemeteries. On July 12, 1864, sixteen graves were quickly laid out in a circle with a simple fence around the perimeter and a flag at the center (41 markers today circle the flagpole). Later a rough stone wall was built around the one acre grounds and a caretaker's cottage erected in one corner. Dorothy Barnes of Takoma Park remembers witnessing Memorial Day ceremonies held there.

As only soldiers who served at Fort Stevens are eligible for burial on its grounds, it has been closed since the last burial in 1936. This honor belongs to long time Takoma Park resident Major E. R. Campbell (Co. G, 1st Vermont Volunteers) who for many years delighted local residents with his stories about the Fort Steven's engagement.

One enters the enclosure feeling time has slipped into ancient history for the cemetery. Two cannon from Fort Steven's defense guard the entrance, and a rostrum on the south side was once used for Memorial Day addresses. It is nice to know the caretaker's cottage is still used even if only as an office by the National Park Service. President Lincoln dedicated the ground as a national cemetery the evening of July 12, 1864.

7. Enter Walter Reed Army Medical Center at the Butternut Street and Georgia Avenue entrance, bear left and just in front of the first building on the right is the Sharpshooter's Marker. Some stories say it is from here that a sharpshooter almost caught President Lincoln when he visited Fort Stevens. In any case a very tall tulip tree apparently offered Confederate sharpshooters the opportunity to easily pick off soldiers defending Fort Stevens, and it was used as a signal station.

Continue around to the National Museum of Medicine and Health (open 10 to 5:30 daily except Christmas), which incorporates the Army Medical Museum founded in 1862 to preserve growing Civil War medical knowledge. The displayed medical specimens, photos, and drawings tell graphically the horror of battle wounds and struggle to treat them with limited medical technology and knowledge of that time.

8. Just over the district line are the Blair properties (some 3000 yards from Fort Stevens but still within range of heavy artillery) used by Early and his men. General Early occupied the 20 room Blair Mansion home of Francis Preston Blair as his headquarters (Blair later noted its contents and wine cellar had been well looted). Begun in 1842, Blair Mansion was centerpiece for a farm totaling nearly 1000 acres. Blair Mansion (Inn) is located between Eastern Avenue and Blair Road just east of Georgia Avenue. Early's officers used Postmaster General Montgomery Blair's home, the Falklands, which burned either from arson or mortar fire on the night of July 12. The next day debris and bodies were found scattered over the grounds. Jessup Blair House known as "The Moorings" is in the center of a nearby park of the same name. Sligo Post Office was used as a field hospital by the Rebels (Sligo area is now downtown Silver Spring).

9. At Acorn Park, adjacent to the Silver Spring that gave the town its name (west of Georgia Avenue on East-West Highway), there are five murals depicting Silver Spring history. An historical marker explains the acorn gazebo was typical of lawn structures of early and mid 19th century and this one may have been used by the Blairs.

10. At Woodside Park, west side of Georgia Avenue at Spring Street, an informative historical marker with 1864 map shows locations of key events related to the Fort Stevens attack.

11. Anxious to see his men safely out of the area, Jubal Early moved north late on the night of the 12th of July and left behind many wounded and dead. Seventeen of the Rebs were gathered and buried at nearby Grace Church (corner of Grace Church Road and Georgia Avenue) where there is a monument dedicated to them.

12. Union Brigadier General S.S. Carroll retired several years after the war ended and built Carroll Manor on acreage he farmed in Takoma Park. Takoma Park resident Clair Garman suggests when Carroll died, the property was divided and sold for development. Probably the streets of Lee, Sheridan, and Grant were named at that time; Garman believes the home at 18 Sherman Avenue may have originally been built as a caretaker's home on Carroll estate.

In the 1950s the General's house was reluctantly taken down but Manor Circle just off Carroll Avenue remains.

13. At the foot of Maple Avenue where it intersects with Sligo Creek is a historic marker for the Presidents' Tree, now fallen. Some say the names of United States presidents from Washington to Johnson were carved by early resident of Takoma Park area Samuel McClosky Fenton. Also possible is that presidential names were left there by Union soldiers during the Civil War. Fairly certain is that a riding path along Sligo Creek was known and used by the Blair families well before the Civil War.

#### Lincoln at Fort Stevens

There are probably as many versions of President Lincoln's close encounter with gunfire at Fort Stevens as there are narrators. We like this one from Takoma Park resident E.R. Campbell who was on the spot at the time. It is taken from The Evening Star, Washington, D.C., January 30, 1934:

Major E. R. Campbell was invited to visit Fort Stevens by commander of Union forces General Horatio G. Wright to witness the firefight during its defense. Campbell recalls seeing President Lincoln standing on a parapet when bullets from Rebel sharpshooters began to whiz through the air. Staff Surgeon General Crawford was hit in the thigh, and this prompted General Crawford to ask the president to leave the scene. Campbell relates Lincoln's joking reply, "Do you know that I am Commander in Chief?" General Crawford acknowledged this but continued: "I order you to come down from that parapet of this fort." The order was obeyed.

#### Find Out More

For more historical information about Takoma Park and its environs, contact Historic Takoma Incorporated for Takoma Park, MD, (301-270-2431). Library resources include the City of Takoma Park MD Library (301-270-1717); Takoma D.C. Library, 5th and Cedar Avenues in D.C. (202-727-1385); and Martin Luther King Library, 901 6th Street, Washington, D.C. (202-727-0321).

The Montgomery Historical Society in Rockville (301-340-2974) sells a map showing routes of Confederate and Union troops during the Civil War within the county, and these publications: *The Underground Railroad in Montgomery County, Maryland* by Anthony Cohen, and *Civil War GUIDE to Montgomery County, Maryland* by Charles T. Jacobs.

Books on the Confederate military initiative against Washington, D.C., include *Season of Fire* by Joseph Judge, Rockbridge Publishing Company, Berryville, Virginia, 1994, and *Jubal Early's Raid* by Benjamin Cooling, Nautical and Aviation Publishing Company, 1989. Also there is *Wartime Washington, Civil War Letters of Elizabeth Blair Lee*.

A 1961 reprint of *The Defenses of Washington (1861-65)* with photos, maps, and architectural drawings of the forts, by Stanley W. McClure, U.S. Dept. of the Interior, National Park Service, National Capital Parks may also be found at the City of Takoma Park  
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