



# COUNCIL ON AMERICA'S MILITARY PAST - U.S.A.

*PRESERVING, INTERPRETING AND SHARING OUR MILITARY HERITAGE*

presents

## The Persistent Pandemic Preservationist

**November 2020**

*Editor's Note: This is Number 4, Volume 1 of a monthly newsletter featuring historic sites across the country responding to the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. The intent is to stay in touch with old and new members, and to share information that is interesting and useful, perhaps to build a community of practice. Each issue will focus on one or more sites. The original Persistent Preservationist was a newsletter produced by esteemed long-time CAMP member Col. Hal Youmans, USA (Ret).*

*This issue features an article by me on the circle of forts around Washington, D.C., that I recently visited. One of the articles in the next issue will take a look at military-themed board games.*

*We welcome feedback and suggestions from readers! Do you know of a fort or museum that has an interesting pandemic story? Would you be willing to reach out and document its story (or persuade the curators to do so)?*

*Happy Thanksgiving — Nick Reynolds, [history-maker@comcast.net](mailto:history-maker@comcast.net)*

### Finding History Close to Home

A few weeks ago I read an engaging article in *The Washington Post* about the many forts that had ringed Washington during the Civil War to protect the capital from the Confederate Army (Graham H. Cornwell, "He Set Out to Show his Son the D.C. Area's 68 Civil War Forts," August 14, 2020). I was struck by a couple of things in the article, whose basic thrust was look around you, there are many worthwhile places to visit and appreciate that you may have ignored up to now. You can no longer find all 68 sites — some have completely disappeared, some are marked only by a plaque, but about five, maintained by the National Park Service, Arlington County, and the City of Alexandria are definitely worth a visit.

One of those places that Prof. Cornwell featured was Ft. Ward in Alexandria, Virginia, not far from our house in Arlington. When I joined CAMP in the 1990s, I remembered hearing about CAMP work parties at Ft.



Ward. One of our founders, Herb Hart, arranged a trade with the city park authorities, who allowed CAMP to meet and store its files in the basement of the fort's museum. In return, CAMP members helped out with chores such as helping to provide security at events, which meant keeping visitors from walking on the earthworks during reenactments.

I had been close many times — the dealership where my car is serviced is about a mile away — but I had never stopped. And so I enlisted my wife Becky and my dog Nemo to go out to take a look on a recent Sunday. We found the museum with little trouble. It looked like a small rail depot in the West in the second half of the 19th Century, except that the trains weren't running and the passengers had found other ways to get around. It was locked up tight. But we went on to take a self-guided tour of the gun emplacements in a very well-maintained star fort. The old infantryman in me could see that the Yankees had chosen its location well — it sat on a piece of high ground with long fields of fire.

One of the things I learned from the *Post* article was that while D.C. was ringed by forts, only one seems to have been seriously tested in battle. This was Ft. Stevens, in the northwest part of the capital, where Confederate general Jubal Early probed the defenses in July 1864. Apparently not heeding the advice of his security detail, President Lincoln went for a look and stood on the ramparts, looking down on the attackers, who fired rounds in his direction that came too close for comfort. I have lived within a few miles of Ft. Stevens for many years, but had never visited, and finally remedied that shortcoming a few days ago.

The fort is just outside Rock Creek Park, almost in Maryland, and today is basically an acre or so of high ground surrounded by townhouses and apartment buildings. What makes the visit worthwhile is the Lincoln connection, marked by a plaque, and the realization that he was taking a genuine risk — according to the signage, some 900 men were killed, wounded, or missing once the shooting was over. It was perhaps a time when we, as a country, were less risk averse than we are now, and that applied to the President as well as to the soldiers on both sides. If you want to commune with Lincoln, this site belongs on your list.



*Ft. Stevens: Lincoln stood on the ramparts at the plaque to the left of the cannon.*



I need to mention a fort that is literally close to home, C. F. Smith in Arlington, because it is such a delightful piece of ground. Its remaining earthworks may not be as extensive as those at either Ft. Ward or Ft. Stevens, but at 19 acres the site is big enough to have walking trails that make Nemo happy. Like Ft. Ward, Ft. Smith has a small museum, but, also like Ft. Ward, it is closed for the duration of the pandemic — reminding us that many small forts are maintaining their grounds but keeping their buildings closed.



*Ft. Smith in Arlington, with its shuttered museum and a sign about the pandemic.*

That two of these forts — Stevens and Smith — are woven into the communities around them reminded me of another point I took away from the newspaper article. Battlefields mean different things to different people, and are not just relics. When I was young, I enjoyed visiting Civil War battlefields and imagining the flow of battle, in awe of the soldiers who performed under extreme pressure, to include my great-great-grandfather, who commanded the 12th Michigan Infantry. I suppose I wondered how I would have measured up. Later I visited battlefields on staff rides. We walked the ground, recapped the history, drew tactical conclusions and thought about leadership lessons. Now as I get older I want more context. I want to think about what the fighting was about, what motivated the soldiers, what came before and after. These sites are a still a part of our lives; they are speaking to us. We need to figure out what they are saying.

*Founded in 1966 as the Council on Abandoned Military Posts; name changed in 1981. CAMP is a non-profit, 501(c)(3) tax-exempt organization whose members are interested in the identification, location, restoration, preservation and memorialization of old military installations and their history and traditions. All persons sharing this interested are invited to join. CAMP publishes an academic journal (The Journal of America's Military Past), and a newsletter on recent developments in historic preservation (Headquarters Heliogram), and holds an annual conference.*