History of Fort Ward

by Wanda S. Dowell,
Director, Fort Ward Museum
& Historic Site

Commander James Harmon Ward
Commander Ward, the man for whom Fort Ward was named, was the first Union naval officer to die in the Civil War. He was placed in command of the Potomac Flotilla to ensure that the Potomac remained open to shipping. On June 27, 1861, the ships engaged a Confederate gun battery at Mathias Point, Virginia. During the engagement Commander Ward was mortally wounded.

After the firing on Fort Sumter on April 12, 1861, troops began pouring into Washington, D.C., in response to President Lincoln's call for 75,000 volunteers to preserve the Union. As the days passed and Virginia's secession from the Union became eminent, there was grave concern in Washington that when the vote of secession became effective at midnight on May 23, the Capital City would be exposed to Confederate attack from across the Potomac River. There was also concern that after Virginia seceded the Confederates would blockade the Potomac River, cutting the Union's vital supply line to Washington.

Just after midnight on May 23, three columns of Union troops advanced into Northern Virginia to establish military occupation. As the advancing army crossed the Potomac River, footholds were established on the Virginia side of the river to guard the approaches to the Capital City. As early as May 26, construction was begun on three earthwork forts to serve as supply bases for the occupying troops.

To ensure that the Confederates did not block the Potomac River to Washington, Commander James Harmon Ward, a prominent naval officer, was placed in command of a flotilla of seven ships to safeguard the river approach to the capital. Prior to the war Commander Ward had gained a reputation as a scholar and authority on naval tactics and gunnery, and had written several textbooks for the navy. He was also one of the officers responsible for the founding of the U.S. Naval Academy at Annapolis, Maryland.

On June 27, 1861, while covering the retreat of a small Union force at Mathias Point—about 50 miles downstream from Washington—the Potomac Flotilla engaged a Confederate gun battery. In the process of sighting a bow gun after the gunner had been killed, Commander Ward was mortally wounded by a Confederate sharpshooter and died some four hours later at the Washington Navy Yard. He was the first Union naval officer to die in the Civil War. The Union commemorated Commander Ward's action and service to the Navy by naming one of the forts in what would become the Defenses of Washington, after him.

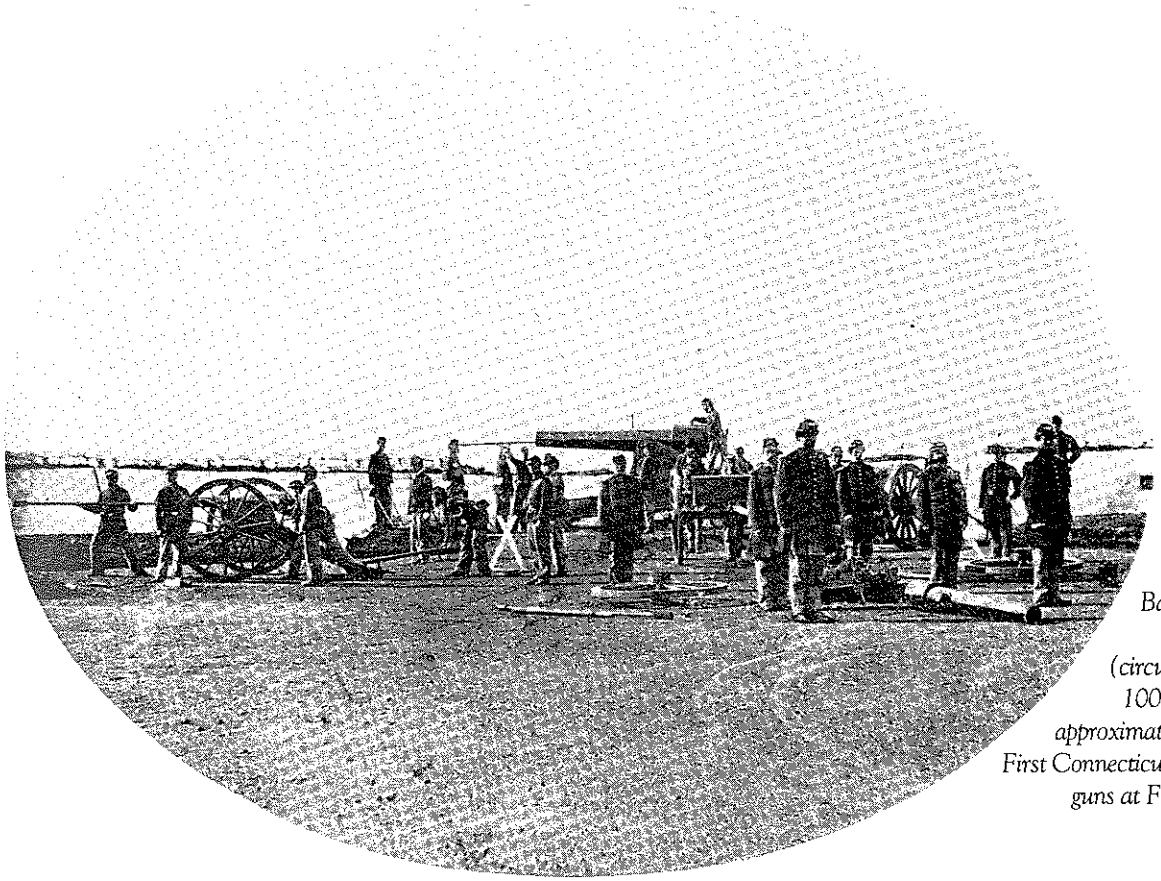
Construction of this system of earthwork forts and batteries began following the Confederate victory at the Battle of First Bull Run (First Manassas) on July 21, 1861. The threat of a possible invasion of Washington by the Confederate Army resulted in the building of an unparalleled 37-mile system of fortifications of 161 forts and batteries, mounting over 900 guns, that by the end of the war in 1865, completely encircled the Capital City.

Five of the forts, Fort Ellsworth, named for Col. Elmer E. Ellsworth who was killed during the occupation of Alexandria, Fort Worth, Fort Williams and Battery Rodgers, also named for Union officers killed in action, were located within the present city limits of Alexandria.

The construction of Fort Ward was begun in July 1861.

"No one knows who turned over the first shovelful of earth in the construction of Fort Ward, but . . . in the summer of 1861 . . . members of the 40th New York Volunteer Infantry [the Mozart Regiment] . . . were assigned to Fort Ward. "Corporal" Frederick Floyd of Company H recorded the events of the final days:

"On Wednesday, Sept. 4, a flag was raised within the enclosure, at which time 3,000 soldiers jumped upon the ramparts and gave three hearty cheers for the stars and stripes, which floated in sight of the enemy on Munson's Hill, where they have



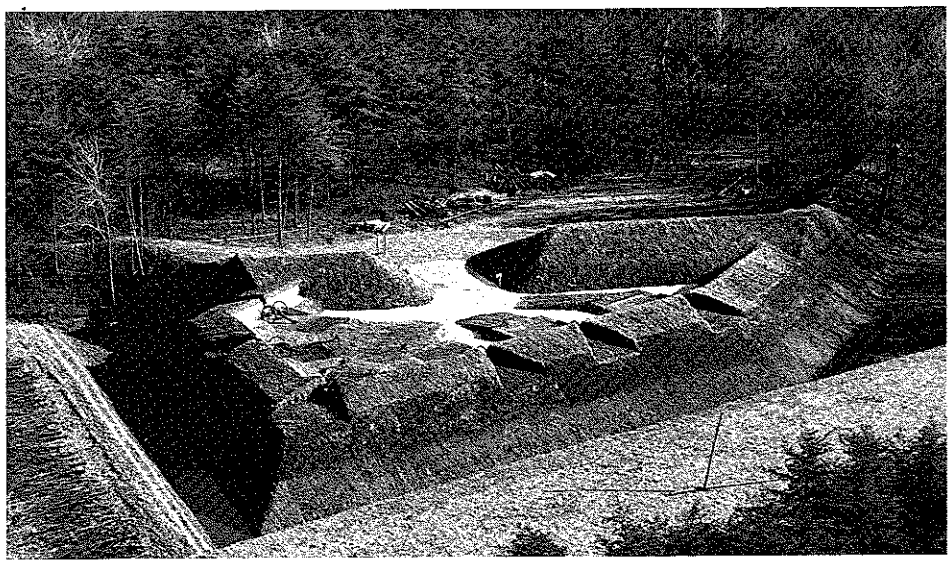
100-Pounder Parrot Rifle, Southwest Bastion
The largest gun in the fort was located in the Southwest Bastion. This rifled cannon was mounted on a center-pintle (circular) carriage, and could fire a 100-pound projectile a distance of approximately 5 miles. Companies of the First Connecticut Heavy Artillery manned the guns at Fort Ward throughout the war. Source: National Archives

Fort Ward, VA

a battery. The fort was almost entirely built by the Mozart Regiment [40th New York] under the skillful direction of the army engineers, who declared that no fort within the fortifications of Washington is more substantially constructed." [From: *The Men of Fort Ward, Defenders of Washington*, by William J. Miller.]

Like the troops at other forts in the Defenses of Washington, the men at Fort Ward spent their days drilling, cleaning their equipment, visiting nearby sites in Washington and going to Mount Vernon. Although the cannoneers were well drilled and proficient in their art, Fort Ward's guns were never tested against the Confederate Army.

In 1863 work was begun to enlarge Fort Ward from its original perimeter of 515 yards to 818 yards, increasing the number of guns in the fort from 24 to 36. The rebuilding continued into the summer of 1865 when a ceremonial gate was hung at the entrance of the fort to commemorate the achievements of the Corps of Engineers as well as the artillerymen who had served at Fort Ward. General John G. Barnard, Chief Engineer of the Defenses of Washington, cited Fort Ward as a "model of military engineering."



Interior view of the Northwest Bastion of Fort Ward, 1964.

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Fort Ward, 1958.
A section of the fort walls barely visible through the heavy undergrowth.

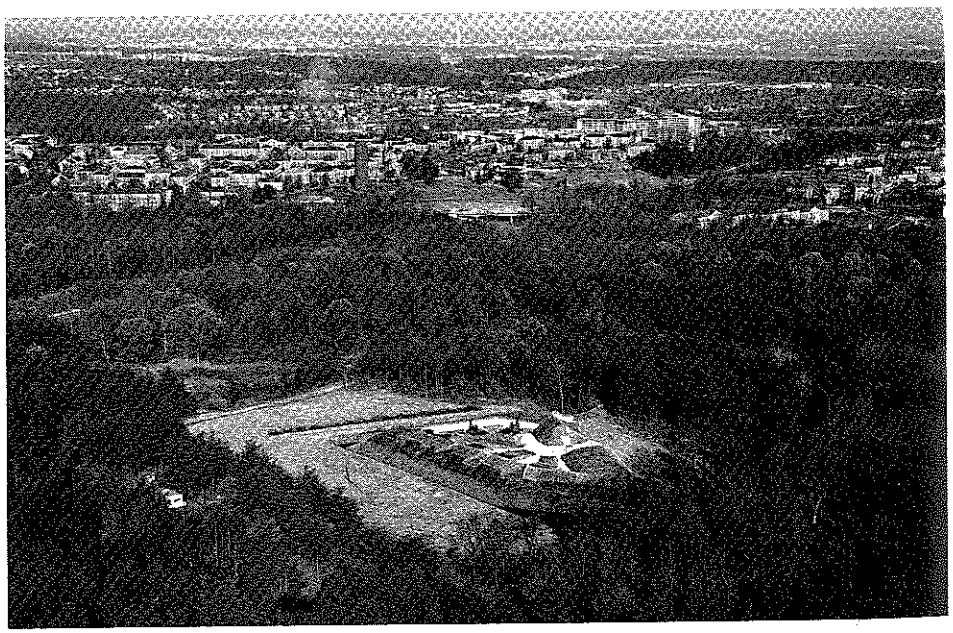
As the end of the Civil War drew near, a plan was initiated to retain 20 forts as permanent defenses for Washington, but the plan was never implemented. Soon after the surrender at Appomattox on April 9, 1865, the Union Army began to rapidly deactivate the formidable system of forts that had indeed protected the nation's capital. Fort Ward remained on the roster of active forts until the end of December 1865. Records indicate that in early 1866, the wood from the fort was sold for the sum of $988, and the land reverted to its original owner.

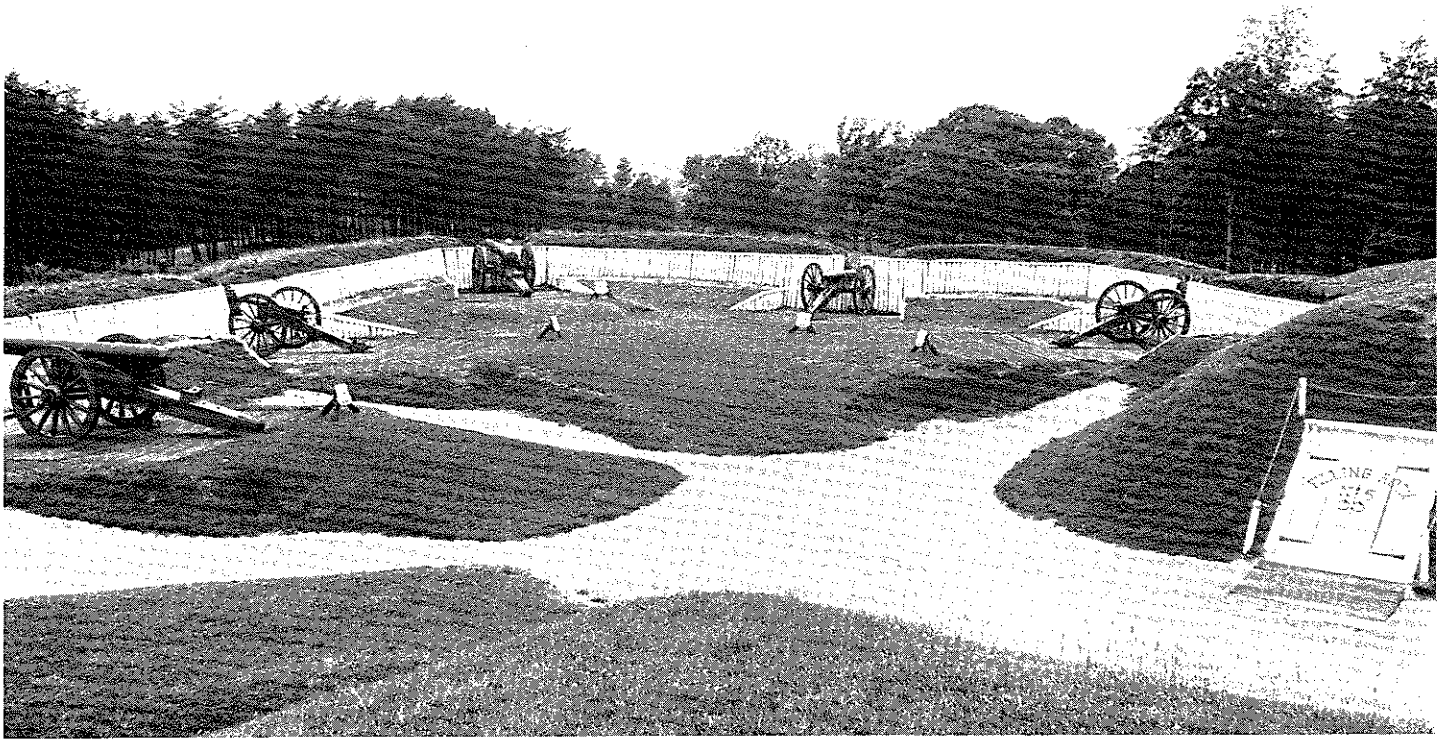
In the late 1950s the city of Alexandria annexed the portion of Fairfax County that bounded the city's western border. Almost simultaneous with the annexation, organizations throughout the country were making plans to commemorate the approaching Civil War Centennial. The Alexandria Civil War Centennial Committee was searching for a project that would be appropriate for Alexandria's contribution to this event.

One committee member, Dorothy C.S. Starr, lived in the newly annexed area of the city. She suggested that the restoration of a Civil War fort located near her home might be an appropriate project. Investigations revealed that the abandoned earthwork had been called Fort Ward, and was still clearly defined after the lapse of 100 years. The area surrounding the earthwork consisted of various parcels of land, some of which had long been abandoned. The Committee made a recommendation to the city that the land be acquired, that a portion of the fort be restored and that a park be developed to surround the fort.

Archaeologist Edward McM. Larrabee was hired by the city in 1961 to conduct a survey of the earthworks to ensure that any restoration work done would be historically accurate. Historian William Hershey was hired to conduct the research on Fort Ward. The archaeological survey revealed that surprisingly Fort Ward was at least 90% intact, and recommended that the Northwest Bastion be selected for restoration because it would provide the most commanding view of the surrounding area.

Aerial view of the completed Northwest Bastion, 1964





Exterior view of the newly restored Northwest Bastion revealing all elements of a 19th-century field fortification, 1964.

It was also decided that the site would best be interpreted by designing the planned museum and support buildings after Union army headquarters that had existed in the Defenses of Washington. The large ceremonial gate, originally hung in 1865, was replicated and placed in its original location along the rear wall of the fort. The evidence of these structures was supported by a series of drawings compiled by the Corps of Engineers of buildings constructed in the Defenses of Washington.

On May 30, 1964, Fort Ward, surrounded by a 40-acre park, was opened to the public. As a result of this preservation effort the city of Alexandria was one of only 6 cities in the country to receive special recognition from the National Civil War Centennial Commission for having made an outstanding contribution to the Centennial.

Now in its 30th year of operation Fort Ward, located at 4301 West Braddock Road, has been called "a model operation for a small museum." The Museum has an outstanding collection of over 3,000 objects of Union military equipment as well as documents, prints and sculpture. The Dorothy C.S. Starr Research Library contains 2,000 volumes of Civil War history. Fort Ward has received numerous grants to assist with the professional development of the Museum and to assist with the preservation of the extant walls of the fort. The site has also received two National Awards of Merit from the American Association for State and Local History. Fort Ward Museum, a division of the office of Historic Alexandria, has been accredited by the American Association of Museums since 1987.

The Friends of Fort Ward was founded in 1982 by a group of private citizens dedicated to the preservation, advancement and public recognition of Fort Ward. The organization has provided continuous support through donations of time as well as funds for acquisitions and professional conservation of museum objects. In 1986 the Friends sponsored the publication of *Mr. Lincoln's Forts, A Guide to the Defenses of Washington*, with Fort Ward featured on the cover as well as in the text. The commitment of the citizens of Alexandria and the success of the Friends are excellent examples of how community support has contributed to preserving Fort Ward for future generations.

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ARCHAEOLOGY IN ALEXANDRIA

FORT WARD REVISITED

BY FRANCINE W. BROMBERG, PRESERVATION ARCHAEOLOGIST, ALEXANDRIA ARCHAEOLOGY

With the arrival of spring, archaeologists, students and volunteers in Alexandria began sharpening their trowels in anticipation of the excavation season. This year, Alexandria Archaeology, a division of the city's Office of Historic Alexandria, concentrated its efforts on an investigation of Fort Ward Park. In 1961, archaeology in Alexandria began with the excavation of the fortifications at Fort Ward (to insure an accurate reconstruction of the fort's northwest bastion). This year's return to the site marked the thirtieth anniversary of archaeology in the city and served as an appropriate way to celebrate Alexandria's leadership in preserving and interpreting our nation's cultural past. The goal of the 1991 investigation included understanding the history of the Fort Ward property not only during the Civil War, but also during the periods before and after the war.

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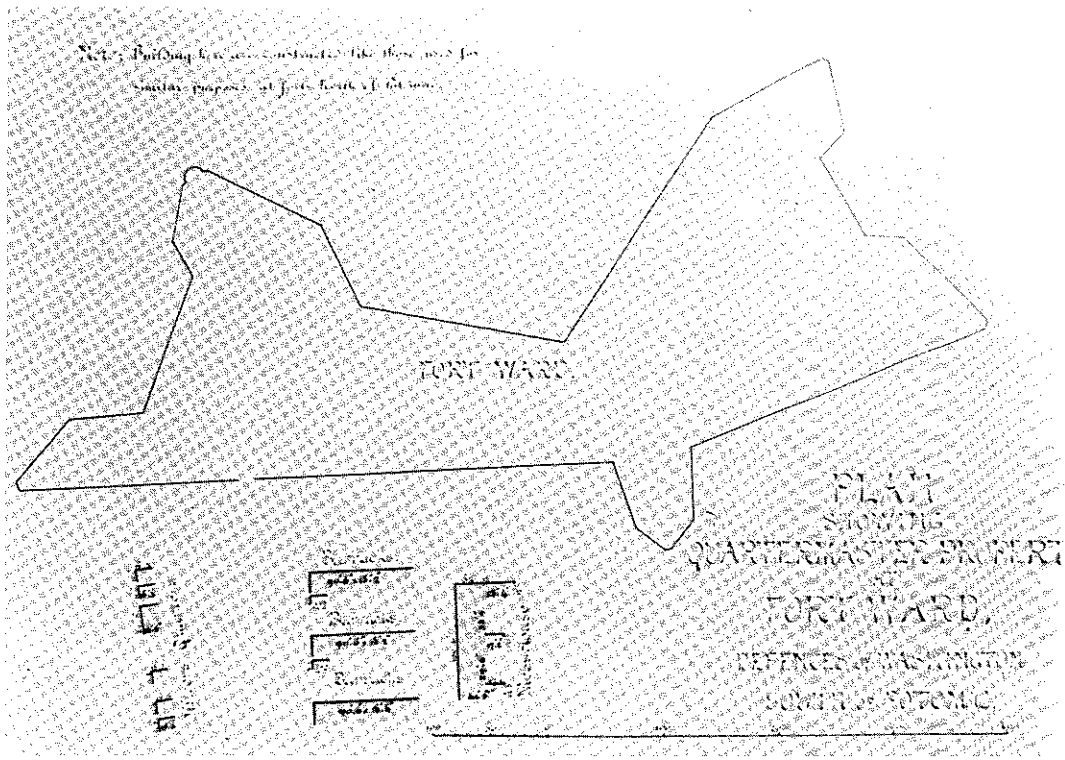
◀ *Two George Washington University students excavate and record data in the Civil War barracks area at Fort Ward.*



An 1863 Quartermaster's drawing shows the outline of Fort Ward and the locations of the barracks and other support buildings. The 1991 archaeological excavation probably investigated the barracks closest to the fortification. Source: *National Archives*

Historical background information sets the stage for the archaeologist's interpretations about a site and the artifacts recovered during excavation. To date, archival research has documented that the Fort Ward property was part of a 1261-acre parcel of land granted to Francis Awbrey on 19 February 1729. Awbrey served as a tobacco inspector at Pohick warehouse in 1732 and later as Sheriff of Prince William County. After Francis Awbrey's death, three of his seven sons sold the tract to William Ramsay on 9 March 1749. Ramsay, a Scottish merchant who helped found Alexandria and served as mayor of the town, probably cultivated parts of this large tract. To cover Ramsay's debts after his death, his heirs deeded the original Awbrey grant to Robert Allison in 1796 and 1797. Allison proceeded to divide and sell the property. In 1843, the parcel which was to become Fort Ward became the property of Phillip Hooff, who owned it until after the Civil War. The Hooff family, prominent in Alexandria since the late eighteenth century, has lent its name to Hooff's Run, which flows southward through the city into Cameron Run.

The post-Civil War history of the site is intricately intertwined with the history of a group of African American families who purchased the property in the 1880s and 1890s, after a Chancery Court case authorized the sale of Hooff's land. Beginning in 1884, Burr and Harriett Shorts became owners of the eastern part of what is now Fort Ward Park; James F. Jackson bought the westernmost section where the actual fort was located. Late nineteenth century owners of other parcels include: John A. Miller, Samuel Javins, John Terrell, Brook Johnson, Jacob Ball and Clara Adams. Many of these individuals were instrumental in the formation of the Oakland Baptist Church, now situated at 3410 King Street. Traditionally thought to have started in 1888 in "a little schoolhouse on Oak Hill," the Oak Hill Baptist Mission, as it was first called, was organized and recognized as the Oakland Baptist Church on September 15, 1891. A school which appears on an early twentieth century plat map of Fort Ward may have served as the site for these early mission and church meetings. The Oakland Baptist Cemetery, now surrounded on three sides by Fort Ward Park, lies north of this location. Several additional graves remain nearby, outside of the official cemetery boundaries. A later African American school may also have been located closer to Braddock Road on what is now park property.

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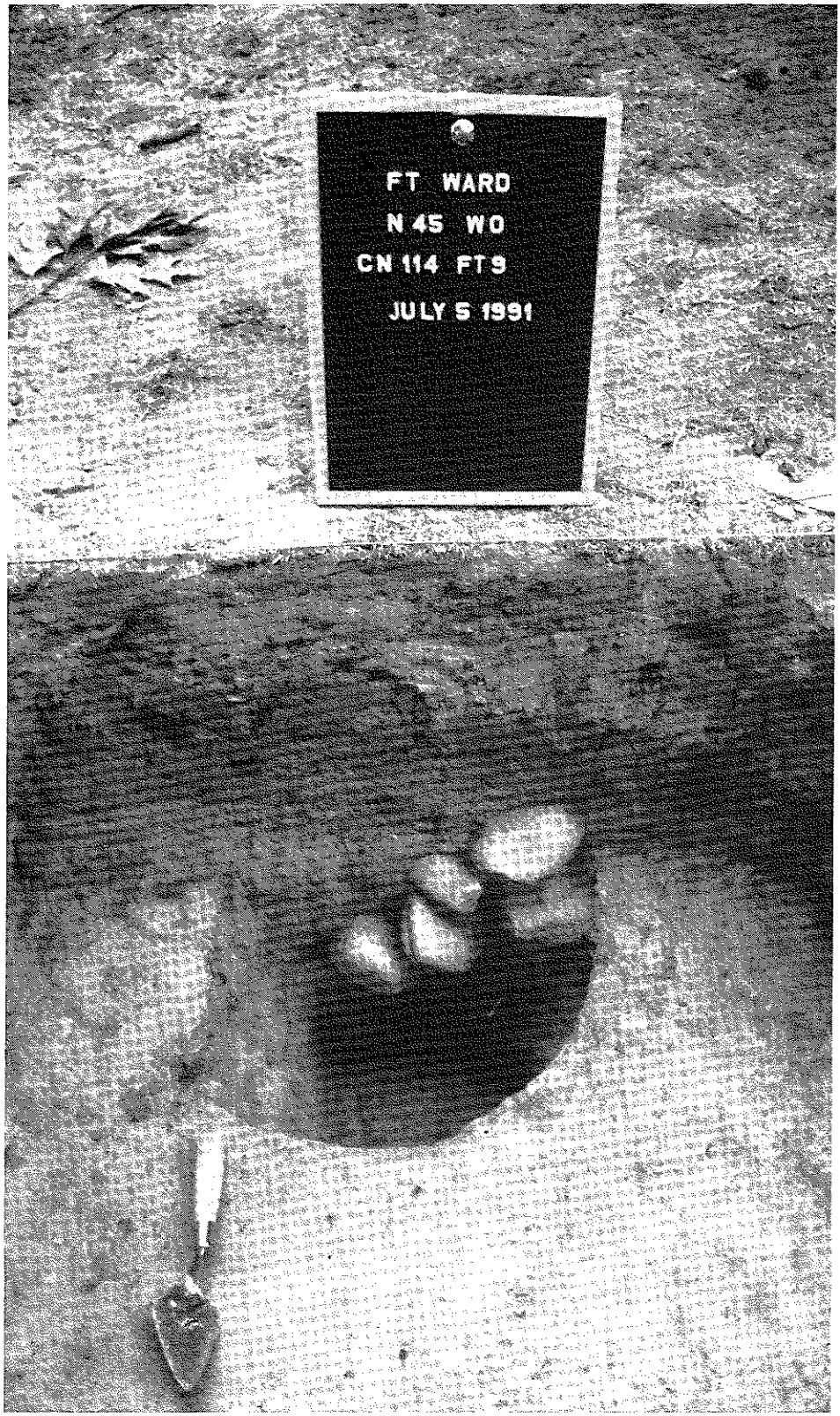

Excavators have bisected a post hole filled with cobbles, which may once have held timber to support the Civil War barracks.

The 1991 excavation season began in May when Alexandria Archaeology sponsored an intensive two-week field school in cooperation with The George Washington University. In the weeks following, the staff and volunteers of Alexandria Archaeology continued the excavation, which culminated in Family Archaeology Day on the sixth of July. Young and old alike, interested in the history and archaeology of their community, visited the site to observe archaeologists in action and to avail themselves of a unique opportunity to help recover artifacts as the excavated soil was sifted through screens.

The archaeological excavation has provided insight into the Civil War and later occupations of Fort Ward. Several minie balls, uniform buttons and mid-nineteenth century pipestems datable to the Civil War period were recovered during this year's investigation. A scatter of numerous late nineteenth through twentieth century domestic artifacts across the site may relate to the post-Civil War African American settlement.

This year's work also sheds light on Civil War construction activity at the site. The excavation focused on the Civil War barracks areas, as determined by correlating the current setting with an 1863 Quartermaster's drawing. Three large post holes filled with cobbles were identified about one foot below the current surface. Lying in a straight line, the post holes probably once held timbers which supported the Civil War barracks.

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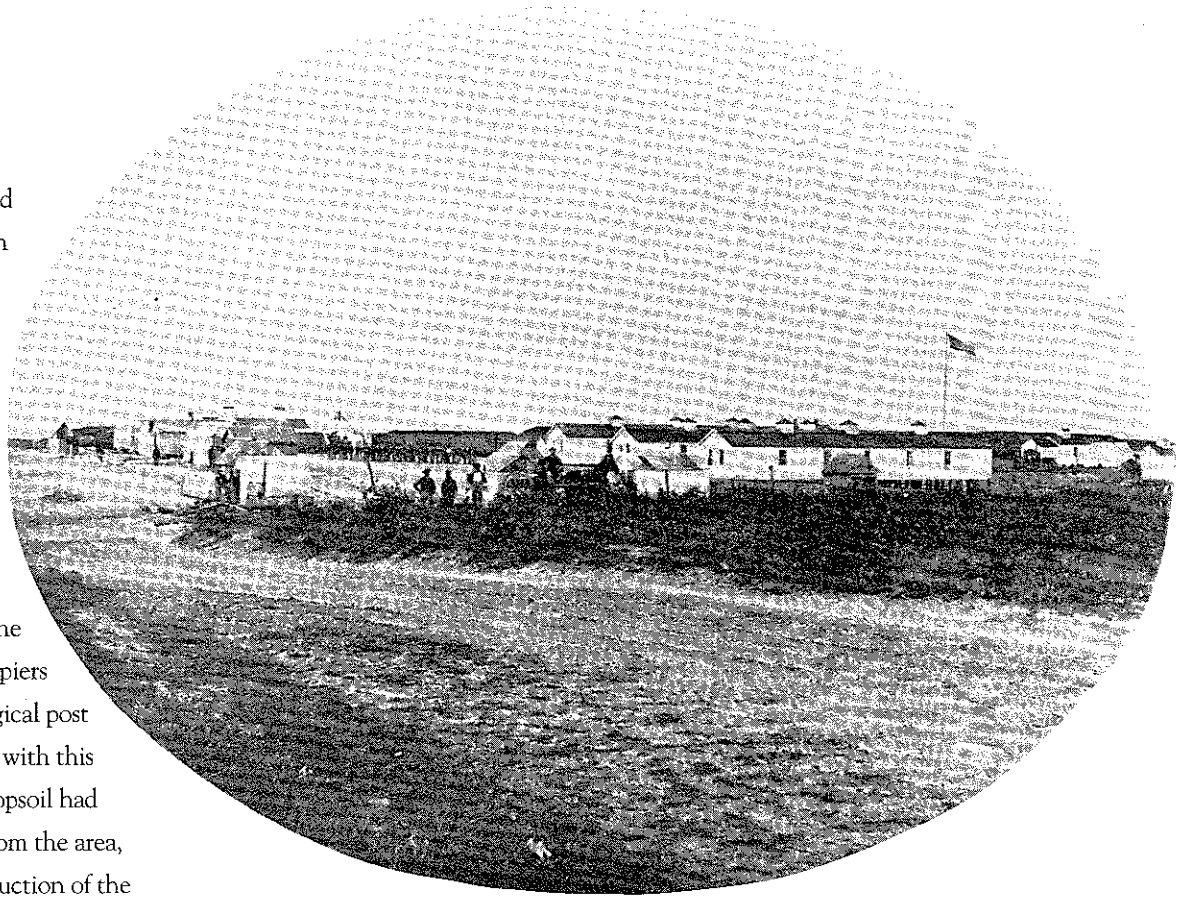
Quartermaster's plans for barracks at other forts called for construction on wooden posts, and a notation on one of the Fort Ward drawings documents that the Ford Ward barracks were to be similarly built. In addition, one of the few surviving historical photographs of Fort Ward illustrates that the barracks rested on wooden piers or footings. The archaeological post hole evidence is consistent with this method of construction. Topsoil had apparently been stripped from the area, probably used in the construction of the fort's embankments, and the barracks were built on the newly exposed surface. A brick feature, also uncovered during the excavation, may have served as support for a wood-burning stove inside the barracks.

One puzzling aspect of Fort Ward's Civil War history revolved around the lack of evidence for a ditch on the eastern size of the embankment. Given the fort's mid-nineteenth century status as a "model of military engineering," historians speculated that the ditch, an integral part of the defensive system, should have encircled the entire structure. This season's excavation verified that the ditch had indeed existed in the area which currently appears flat. The artifacts in the ditch's fill dirt indicate that the level surface was probably created sometime between 1885 and 1915, most likely by the post-Civil War African American landowners.



First Connecticut Heavy Artillery Companies C. E. and L.
Fort Ward, Virginia
ca. 1863
A view of the barracks, mess hall and officers' huts at Fort Ward. The buildings were located near the rear wall of the fort.
Source: *National Archives*

Through the combination of history and archaeology, a more complete picture emerges of the developments at this important Alexandria landmark. Ferreting out the details of the history of land use on the property will require additional detective work. The relationship between the post-Civil War African American settlers at Fort Ward with other developing African American communities, such as Mudtown, and with the nearby Theological Seminary needs clarification. Future plans include examining more documents at the National Archives and the Fairfax County Courthouse as well as interviewing members of the Oakland Baptist Church and descendants of its original founders.

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