During the first days of Alexandria’s Civil War occupation, the Union established a presence on Shuter’s Hill, where the Masonic temple currently stands. This location was not only desirable because of its height but because of the position above two major roads coming into Alexandria: Leesburg Pike to the north and the Little River Turnpike to the south, as well as nearby railroad lines.

The day after Col. Elmer Ellsworth was killed at the Marshall House on the corner of King and Pitt streets on May 24, 1861, work began on the fort that would be named in his honor. Members of the Dulany family had owned the property since 1799 and although their mansion house burned down in 1842, another home had been constructed since then. Union troops took over this building and the grounds to construct Fort Ellsworth shown in this photograph taken during the Civil War.

Fort Ellsworth had four bastions, a perimeter of more than 600 yards and emplacements for 29 guns. Its armament included three 24-pounder siege guns, nine eight-inch seacoast howitzers, a 100-pounder Parrott gun and two 24-pounder Coehorn mortars. The Dulany’s home was put into use a headquarters and hospital and the Army constructed other buildings including officers’ quarters and two barracks. Hundreds of soldiers camped on Shuter’s Hill, some not far from the Dulany family cemetery. Fort Dahlgren, a smaller earthwork battery, was constructed on Shuter’s Hill, northeast of Fort Ellsworth.

After the war, the forts were dismantled and the Dulany family reclaimed their property. But evidence of Fort Ellsworth is present today with angles of its northeast bastion still visible from the observation deck of the George Washington Masonic Memorial.