



# Alexandria Times

Established in 1797 as *The Alexandria Times and Advertiser*

## Out of the Attic

### Fort Ward: Preserving a local landmark

*Alexandria Times, June 14, 2018*

*Image: Fort Ward's gate, Office of Historic Alexandria.*

Fort Ward was one of the largest Union forts that comprised the Civil War Defenses of Washington. The fort was dismantled by the government in late 1865, although the earthwork walls remained. By the 1870s, African American residents began settling in the area and established "The Fort" community, which continued until the founding of Fort Ward Park in the early 1960s.

The project to restore the Northwest bastion of Fort Ward and to interpret the site with period reproduction structures was based on careful archaeological and historical research. An archaeological team was contracted by the city to excavate the bastion and begin the restoration work, and a



historian was hired to write the historical report on the fort and the reconstruction project. When the archaeologists began their work, the site was covered with a thick overgrowth of trees and brush, although the main outline of the fort and most of its earthwork features were still visible.

After clearing the area, archaeologists dug test trenches in the bastion, which revealed information about construction methods and the location of specific features. This data was used in conjunction with engineer plans of the fort and military manuals of the Civil War period to authentically reconstruct the bastion. Although the restoration crew had the help of modern machinery, rebuilding the bastion walls still required manual labor, as it had during the Civil War.

Original building methods and materials were used: the earthwork walls were built up in layers above the site's extant walls, the earth tamped and covered with sod and wooden pole revetment installed to support the interior of the structure. The result was a restoration that is still unique in the Washington area, as Fort Ward is the best preserved of the forts that remain of the defense system, and the only one to feature a recreated bastion.

The project also included the reconstruction of the fort's ceremonial entrance gate, a replica of a typical officers' hut, the museum and a restroom building – all based on Civil War period engineer plans and photographs. The gate, a landmark of Fort Ward Park, stands on its original site and gives context to the preserved earthwork walls. Like many of the wooden elements of the fort, the gate has suffered deterioration from weather and insect damage over the years, which has required periodic restoration



## Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

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repair, most recently in 2009 and again in 2017 with funding from the city and the museum's support group, the Friends of Fort Ward.

The fort's fragile earthwork walls have also posed continuous preservation challenges. Just as the Civil War engineers who supervised the building of the forts coped with the detrimental effects of erosion, so city staff have combated the deterioration of the preserved walls of Fort Ward from factors such as weather erosion, uprooting of trees, invasive vegetation, human trampling and animal tunneling. A seasonal turf treatment program to establish strong ground cover, and implementation of specialized erosion repair projects to stabilize targeted areas of the fort walls have been successful approaches to preservation.

In the more than 50 years since Fort Ward opened to the public, preserved historical artifacts and evidence of structural features related to the Civil War fort and postwar Fort community have been discovered throughout the Park. In a 1991 excavation, city archaeologists found postholes related to one of the barrack buildings, and uncovered the trace of the original defensive ditch that bordered the rear wall of the fort.

In 2014, in preparation for the installation of a visitor walkway in the fort, the location of the fort's well was discovered. Homestead sites and grave sites related to the Fort community have also been methodically excavated, uncovering important information that will contribute to Fort Ward's Master Interpretive Plan process that is now underway. The Interpretive Plan, which will be based on the legacy of Fort Ward's Civil War and post-Civil War past, will be the next exciting chapter in the Park's history.

*"Out of the Attic" is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as "Marking Time" and explored Alexandria's history through collection items, historical images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into "Out of the Attic" and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.*

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