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Inside The Civil War Defenses of Washington: An Interview with Steve T. Phan

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Abstract

Over the course of this year, we'll be interviewing some of the speakers from the upcoming [2018 CWI conference](#) about their talks. Today we are speaking with Steve T. Phan, a Park Ranger and historian at the Civil War Defenses of Washington. Prior to his arrival at CWDW, Steve worked as an intern and park guide at Richmond National Battlefield Park, Hopewell Culture National Historical Park, and Rock Creek Park. A military history scholar of the Civil War era, Steve's research focuses on military occupation, operational command, fortifications, and the Western Theater during the Civil War. He is the author of several articles about Asians and Pacific Islanders in the Civil War and is currently writing a guide book for the Civil War Defenses of Washington. Steve is also continuing his work on an extended research project about the Union Army First Corps and the life of General John F. Reynolds. He holds a Masters degree in American History, with a concentration in Public History. *[excerpt]*

Keywords

Contrabands, CWI Summer Conference, Historic Preservation, United States Colored Troops, Washington DC

Disciplines

History | Military History | Public History | United States History

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Inside The Civil War Defenses of Washington: An Interview with Steve T. Phan

By [Ashley Whitehead Luskey](#)

Over the course of this year, we'll be interviewing some of the speakers from the upcoming [2018 CWI conference](#) about their talks. Today we are speaking with Steve T. Phan, a Park Ranger and historian at the Civil War Defenses of Washington. Prior to his arrival at CWDW, Steve worked as an intern and park guide at Richmond National Battlefield Park, Hopewell Culture National Historical Park, and Rock Creek Park. A military history scholar of the Civil War era, Steve's research focuses on military occupation, operational command, fortifications, and the Western Theater during the Civil War. He is the author of several articles about Asians and Pacific Islanders in the Civil War and is currently writing a guide book for the Civil War Defenses of Washington. Steve is also continuing his work on an extended research project about the Union Army First Corps and the life of General John F. Reynolds. He holds a Masters degree in American History, with a concentration in Public History.



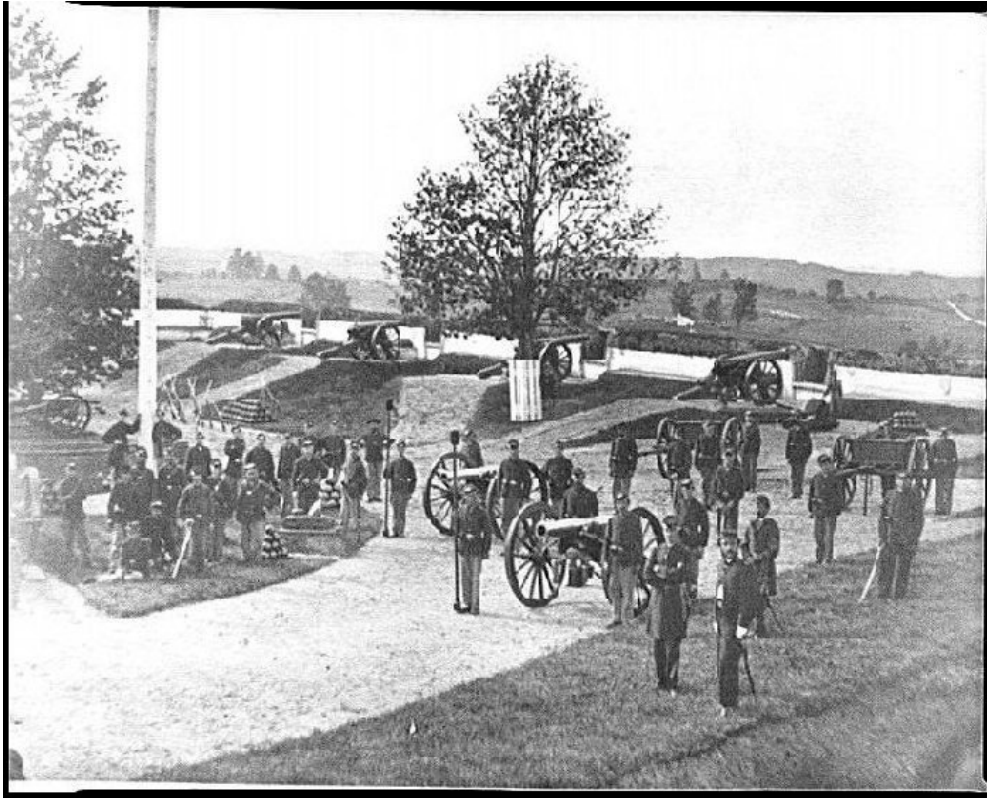
Steve Phan. Image courtesy of Steve Phan

CWI: What are some of the major forts that comprise the Civil War Defenses of Washington? When were they constructed, and what purpose did they serve in protecting the Federal capital?

Phan: By 1865, there were 68 major forts surrounding Washington D.C. This extensive series of fortifications included 93 batteries armed with over 900 cannons, and was connected by 30 miles of military road. The Defenses of Washington were organized into three main sectors: The Arlington Line (protecting the city from the southwest in Virginia), the Northern Line (protecting the city from Confederate incursion from Maryland to the north), and the Eastern Branch Line, also known as the Anacostia River Line (protecting the city from Maryland to the east). The forts were constructed rapidly starting in the late summer of 1861 in response to the Union defeat at First Manassas/Bull Run, and continued throughout that fall and winter. Brigadier General John G. Barnard, Chief Engineer of the Department of Washington, spearheaded the forts' construction. Barnard's post-war report notes that national fears of an imminent Confederate assault resulted in hasty construction and flawed placement of many of the forts. Most forts and earthworks of the period were built on high ground and located on key avenues of approach to the city, adjacent to roads and bridges. Such was not always the case with Washington's initial line of defenses. However, these flaws were remedied in the coming years with the expansion of the fort system and the construction of auxiliary batteries to eliminate major gaps and blind-spots in the line.

Constructed in the immediate wake of the Union defeat at First Manassas/Bull Run, when Federal army engineers feared an assault from the Confederate army lurking in nearby Centreville, Virginia, the Arlington Line stretched from Fort Marcy (with the far right flank anchored on Chain Bridge) to the west, then south to Alexandria, with Fort Willard anchoring the far left flank of the line. The Arlington Line was formidable. Over 30 major forts and countless batteries, densely packed and concentrated, made this portion of the Defenses of Washington the most impregnable from enemy assault.

The Northern Defenses were constructed in August & September of 1861. These forts were smaller and less concentrated than the Arlington Line. The Northern Defenses were expanded in the aftermath of the Confederate invasion of Maryland in September, 1862. Realizing that a rebel victory at Antietam would have allowed General Robert E. Lee an easy march south toward Washington, Federal engineers expanded the fort's perimeters, adding more artillery and supplementing the forts with numerous batteries (some initially armed but unmanned) that covered the deep ravines, valleys, and ridgelines between the forts. There were several critical forts on this line including Fort Reno, the largest fortification in the Northern Defenses, which was erected on the highest point in Washington D.C. A few miles to the west of Fort Reno, Fort Stevens guarded the critical Seventh Street Turnpike (the north-south road connecting Silver Spring, MD to Washington, D.C.). Forts Bayard, Reno, Kearny, DeRussy, Stevens, Slocum, and Totten were all engaged during the July 11-12 Battle of Fort Stevens when General Jubal Early's Confederates threatened to pierce the Washington defenses.. All, except Kearny, are currently under NPS management.



Company F, 3rd MA Heavy Artillery on duty at Fort Stevens, August, 1865. Image courtesy of the National Park Service

The Eastern Branch (Anacostia River) Defenses were considered to reside within the zone of least threat. Unlike the Arlington and Northern lines, the forts on the Eastern Branch were not connected by earthen walls or trenches, as Federal engineers did not fear a direct infantry assault from the southeast. Instead, they concentrated on reinforcing a 300-foot-high ridgeline that ran along the eastern side of the city for approximately six miles. They knew that, should Confederates successfully seize that ridgeline, their artillery could shell the city and wreak havoc on the U.S. Naval Yard and Arsenal. Fort Foote remained active in the post-war period as the U.S. Army experimented with reinforced concrete walls and disappearing gun carriages—the precursor to the Endicott Fortification System. Two original, massive 15-inch Rodman guns were remounted at Fort Foote in the 1980s to serve as the focal point of interpretive programs. Forts Mahan, Stanton, Greble, and Foote (the major forts comprising the Eastern Branch) are now all under NPS management.

CWI: What was life like for the soldiers manning the defenses? What was their reputation amongst their peers in the military?

Phan: The original defenders of these forts were volunteer regiments that mustered into Federal service in 1861. The men built, trained, and garrisoned the forts as newly appointed general-in-chief George B. McClellan organized the Army of the Potomac. These soldiers constructed Forts Pennsylvania (Reno) and Massachusetts (Stevens); it

was only after the death of these two prominent officers that the forts were renamed. Like the forts, the defenders of Washington evolved over time. The regiments that originally manned them eventually organized for field service and departed for the battle front. They were replaced with new units known as Heavy Artillery Regiments that were specifically delegated for duty within the forts. Many of these regiments had been infantry units that were re-designated as “Heavy” regiments upon their arrival in Washington. These regiments, such as the 1st Massachusetts Volunteer Heavy Artillery Regiment, were often significantly larger than traditional infantry regiments. Originally raised as the 14th Regiment of Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry in 1861, the regiment reorganized as the 1st Massachusetts Heavies in Washington, and was comprised of a whopping 2,552 soldiers who were dispersed to serve garrison duty in several different forts along the Arlington Line. For the Heavies, service in the defenses was monotonous. These men spent most of their time drilling and working on the construction and upkeep of their forts. The Heavies were trained both in how to man the massive siege guns emplaced within the defenses and in infantry tactics. These men, along with paid laborers (including African American freedmen), worked continuously on the forts throughout the war and even into the summer of 1865, as General Barnard was never fully satisfied with the fort’s design and construction. They expanded fort walls, added bastions and bastionets, and mounted larger caliber guns were mounted.

Despite the monotony of their daily work in the forts, the Heavies reaped some rewards from their close proximity to the nation’s capital. Officers regularly attained passes to visit the city, and enlisted men received frequent visits from opportunistic vendors who sold them specialized goods. (One such vendor was arrested for selling liquor to soldiers at Fort Mahan!) The forts also served as the residential quarters for their garrisons. Initially, mere tents, located on the exterior of the fort grounds, housed the soldiers; however, as the war lagged on, wooden structures, such as barracks, mess houses, offices, and horse stables were constructed. The Heavies’ relatively “cushy” life did not go unnoticed by veteran field soldiers, who often derisively labeled their Washington colleagues as “Uncle Abe’s Pets” and “Band Box Regiments.” When the Heavies were transferred to the front in the spring of 1864, they knew they had to earn the veterans’ respect through combat valor; many actually looked forward to finally “proving” their manhood in battle, but confided to loved ones at home that they feared that they would never have the opportunity to achieve such honors on the battlefield. That all changed during the deadly spring and summer battles of the 1864 Overland Campaign when the Heavy Artillery regiments would end up taking some of the highest casualty rates of the entire war.

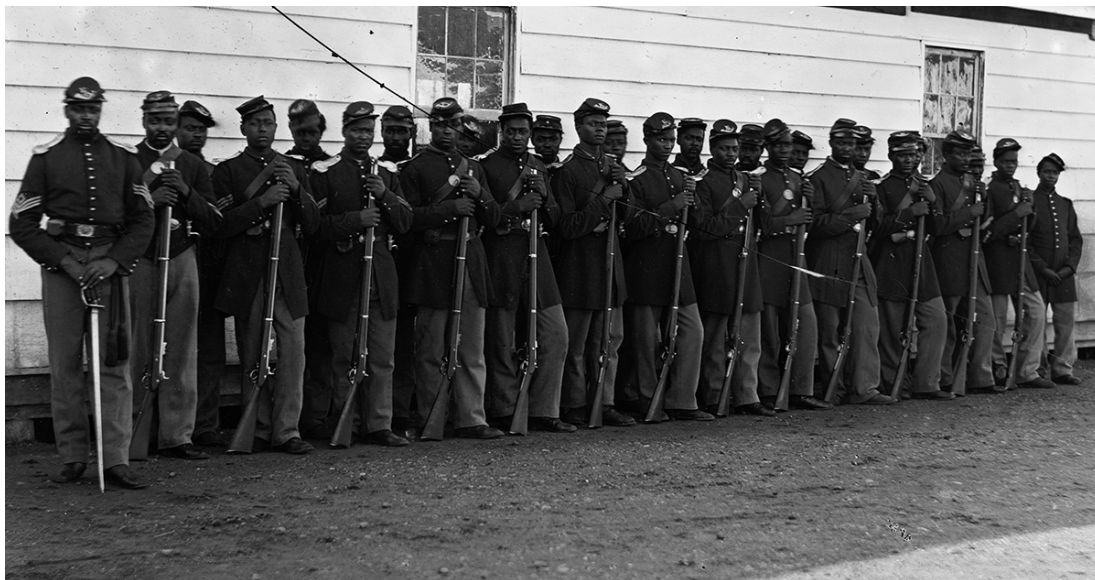
CWI: What role did contrabands and contraband camps play in the history of the forts surrounding Washington?

Phan: Contrabands and contraband camps played a significant role in the history of the Washington defenses. It is important to note that there was an enslaved population of approximately 3,300 residing with the District of Columbia at the war’s start. Congress allocated funds to the D.C. slaveholders in April of 1862 as part of the Compensated

Emancipation Act, which officially ended slavery in the District. Throughout the war, an estimated forty thousand fugitive slaves—often referred to as “contrabands of war”—fled to Washington, D.C. in search of refuge and employment. Of that number, some ten thousand supported the Federal cause as laborers, soldiers, nurses, domestics, and in other rear-echelon duties. The massive influx of African Americans into the city forced the Federal government to respond. Large contraband camps sprouted up throughout the city. Camp Barker, near present day Logan Circle, was one these camps. Disease was rampant, and the refugees lacked proper clothing, housing, and food. To alleviate manpower and health issues, the Federal government took possession of farms abandoned by secessionists in Northern Virginia and created five workers’ camps. The freedmen farmed the ground to feed Union armies as well as themselves.

Starting in 1863, many regiments of United States Colored Troops (often comprised of runaway slaves or contrabands) garrisoned the forts themselves. Several USCT regiments were organized and trained in Washington, D.C. including the 1st USCT, which trained on Mason’s Island (present-day Theodore Roosevelt Island), a former slave plantation. The regiment was transferred to the Department of the James, where it saw heavy action in the campaigns against Richmond and Petersburg in 1864 and 1865. Contrabands were critical to the upkeep of the defenses. Thousands were needed to expand the forts and construct new batteries, trenches, and roads. A massive laborer camp was established to the rear of Fort Mahan (Eastern Branch Defenses) where white and black workers lived as they began their work on the fortifications.

This image, perhaps the most well-known photograph of African American soldiers during the Civil War, was taken at Fort Washington, Northern Defenses near Bladensburg, Maryland.



Company E, 4th USCT. Image courtesy of the Library of Congress

Several additional contraband camps also stood adjacent to or within the forts themselves. My own preliminary research on these camps has revealed numerous African American “squatter” communities that sprouted up in the forts that were abandoned at the war’s conclusion. One such community, named “Freetown,” took root in Fort Reno. African Americans also settled on the land encompassed by Fort Stevens. This land had belonged to Elizabeth Thomas, whose family owned over 80 acres when the war began. Federal soldiers destroyed much of her property to build the fort. After the war, Thomas sold small parcels of the land to free blacks, expanding the established black community in the area now known as Brightwood.

CWI: Describe some of the biggest challenges and opportunities of interpreting and preserving the Civil War defenses of Washington. What kinds of special educational programming have you conducted at the park and how has it sought to address some of those issues?

Phan: The challenges and opportunities in interpreting and preserving the Civil War Defenses of Washington are myriad! One of the most common questions we receive from visitors is, “Where are the forts?” Nearly all of the forts were disarmed and dismantled after the war, their ditches filled in and their walls destroyed. Additionally, the forts that do still survive are spread out in a large arc around the nation’s bustling capital and are managed by multiple different entities and municipalities. Of the 68 major forts and 93 batteries, the CWDW manages 18 sites (17 forts, 1 battery) as well as Battleground National Cemetery. Arlington County oversees Forts Ethan Allan and C.F. Smith. Alexandria oversees Fort Ward, which possesses the only museum and visitor center in the Defenses of Washington. These extant forts, particularly those in the Northern and Eastern Branch Defenses, are located throughout the District’s green spaces; however, natural growth has reclaimed the landscape, covering the original walls, magazines, and bombproofs with trees and vegetation. Fortunately, there is regular visitor use at the NPS fort sites, which have been re-designed as recreational parks with hiking and biking trails and picnic tables. However, most visitors, including regulars, simply walk past the remnants of the forts without realizing they are part of an historic structure. In fact, many don’t realize that the “Fort” in the name of the site actually means there is actually a fort there. Such is the case with Fort Totten, which sits adjacent to the Totten Metro Station, yet most people are unaware that the Station was named after the fort. Additionally, because the historic structures at sites like Forts DeRussy and Totten are so “hidden” or “camouflaged” by natural overgrowth or other urban structures, passersby regularly walk, hike, or bike directly on top of fort walls, leading to further erosion and other preservation issues. The NPS is currently discussing adding new signage in these areas to try to put an end to these destructive and prohibited activities.



The Civil War Defenses of Washington. Image courtesy of the Civil War Preservation Trust.

Adding to these public awareness challenges is the fact that even many Civil War enthusiasts do not realize there is an NPS program that oversees these 18 sites. Because we lack a visitor center and designated ranger stations, and because we work in conjunction with three different national parks in the D.C. region, it is difficult to create one central connection point with the public. To remedy this issue, our program is constantly reaching out to the public and various groups with both interpretive and educational programs. We visit local schools, libraries, and communities centers to discuss the Defenses of Washington and many other aspects of the war. We formulate

our programs to connect with the diverse communities that reside in the areas around the forts. Although it can also be one of our greatest challenges, one of the major benefits of the CWDW is our mobility. With sites spread out around the city, we can, in essence, take the defenses to the people. This past September, I gave a lecture about Hispanics and the Civil War for Hispanic Heritage Month at a city library in Alexandria. The library has already scheduled us for several additional programs in the coming months to commemorate Native American Heritage Month and Asian and Pacific Islander heritage. Our mobility allows us to reach deep into the surrounding communities to connect people of all backgrounds to the National Park Service and our unique sites' history within the broader context of the Civil War.

It is my goal to expand the interpretive, educational, and preservation potential of the Civil War Defenses of Washington as much as possible through new partnerships with nearby schools and colleges, the further cultivation of the park's internship and volunteer program, and the development of new programs in partnership with our colleagues at Rock Creek Park, George Washington Memorial Parkway, and National Capital Parks East. We are also discussing and training for the resurrection of our ranger-led bike tours of the Eastern Branch Defenses. We have organized a tour of our various sites for our various employees in the region, including botanists, architects, historians, to mix and interact with the various branches of the NPS at the forts. We also spend much of our fall and winter in classrooms engaging in reading sessions, arts and crafts, living history, and other educational activities. We are currently organizing new formal hikes of the forts for the coming season, and continue to expand our presence on social media and through our website. I am delighted to say that the campaign to promote the CWDW is alive and moving forward!