



8-7-2018

Doors into the Past

Emily Vega
Gettysburg College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/compiler>

 Part of the [Military History Commons](#), [Public History Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

Share feedback about the accessibility of this item.

Vega, Emily, "Doors into the Past" (2018). *The Gettysburg Compiler: On the Front Lines of History*. 300.
<https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/compiler/300>

This is the author's version of the work. This publication appears in Gettysburg College's institutional repository by permission of the copyright owner for personal use, not for redistribution. Cupola permanent link: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/compiler/300>

This open access blog post is brought to you by The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of The Cupola. For more information, please contact cupola@gettysburg.edu.

Doors into the Past

Abstract

This post is part of a series featuring behind-the-scenes dispatches from our [Pohanka Interns](#) on the front lines of history this summer as interpreters, archivists, and preservationists. See [here](#) for the introduction to the series.

Submerged into the side of a grassy hill are two large white doors. As one looks at Fort Stevens from a distance, the doors seem misplaced. They randomly appear in a visitor's line of sight as he/she examines the curves and dips of the earthwork before them. But these doors tell a much more interesting story than might be expected. To the left of these doors once stood the home of Elizabeth Proctor Thomas, a free African American woman, whose family originally owned eighty-eight acres of land in the Brightwood area of Washington, DC. At a time of few economic opportunities for the African American community, having this land was an important part of being self-sustaining. On this high ground, Thomas's family farmed and sold parts of their holdings to relatives and other African American families. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

A Look at the Past, Pohanka Internship, Thinking Historically

Disciplines

History | Military History | Public History | United States History

Comments

This blog post originally appeared in [The Gettysburg Compiler](#) and was created by students at Gettysburg College.

THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Doors into the Past

By *Emily Vega '19*

This post is part of a series featuring behind-the-scenes dispatches from our [Pohanka Interns](#) on the front lines of history this summer as interpreters, archivists, and preservationists. See [here](#) for the introduction to the series.



A view of the magazine door. Photo courtesy Emily Vega.

Submerged into the side of a grassy hill are two large white doors. As one looks at Fort Stevens from a distance, the doors seem misplaced. They randomly appear in a visitor's line of sight as he/she examines the curves and dips of the earthwork before them. But these doors tell a much more interesting story than might be expected. To the left of these doors once stood the home of Elizabeth Proctor Thomas, a free African American woman, whose family originally owned eighty-eight acres of land in the Brightwood area of Washington, DC. At a time of few

economic opportunities for the African American community, having this land was an important part of being self-sustaining. On this high ground, Thomas's family farmed and sold parts of their holdings to relatives and other African American families.

Due to Washington's position between Virginia and Maryland, it made the city an incredibly vulnerable and easy target during the Civil War. With the Confederates approach looming, the Defenses of Washington went into motion and made it one of the most heavily fortified cities in the world.

Ms. Thomas had a small cottage approximately twenty feet away from the cellar doors where she lived prior to the Civil War with her six-month old daughter. But with eminent threat to the city, Union troops took possession of Ms. Thomas' property and dismantled her home. They used her land to construct Fort Massachusetts, which was later renamed Fort Stevens.



During the war, the white cellar doors actually served as the magazine for the Fort. Fort Stevens is the only location within the city limits to face a battle to protect the capitol. Nothing survived on Ms. Thomas' original property after the Civil War and there is great debate about whether she ever received the compensation she had been promised.

More broadly, Fort Stevens served not only as protection from opposing forces but also as a safe haven for enslaved people. This movement of African Americans to the area during the Civil War can be seen in the cultural landscape of the city today. Today, the majority of the 68 forts constructed to defend the city during the war have been lost to the growing urban city and built over. The National Park Service is preserving the few forts that do still maintain their shape but to a visitor's eye, they are often hard to spot in the brush of parks.

The Civil War Defenses of Washington's mission is to educate the residents of the capitol about the fortifications that once existed in their neighborhoods and the Civil War history that is found in their parks. But one struggle that CWDW faces is finding effective ways to engage the local communities who do not know the historical value of these green spaces. While many visitors see the fort locations as a place to enjoy the sun or walk their dogs, they often fail to connect with the history of these spaces. Through public programming and events, CWDW hopes to get the community more interested in the history that exists in their neighborhoods. These white cellar doors were once a part of a home, then a part of battleground, and now exist as an artifact of Washington, D.C.'s own Civil War history.



Emily Vega on the job during the 154th Battle of Fort Stevens Commemoration. Photo courtesy Emily Vega.