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Finding Meaning in Land

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Finding Meaning in Land

Abstract

This post is the final one 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.

This summer, I had the privilege of interning at the Civil War Defenses of Washington, in Washington D.C. The Civil War Defenses of Washington is unique within the National Park system. Unlike most historical and military parks, the Civil War Defenses of Washington has no central location or site. Rather, the park is made up of nineteen different fort sites used in defense of the city of Washington during the Civil War. What also makes this park unique is its relationship with the land and local terrain. Most of these forts were constructed through the strategic manipulation of land. Civil War soldiers molded the land to build earthen trenches, mounds, and hills. At many of the forts, these earthworks are the only structures that link these places to the Civil War. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

A Look at the Past, Pohanka Internship, Thinking Historically, Civil War Defenses of Washington

Disciplines

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Comments

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Finding Meaning in Land

By *Keira Koch '19*

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Throughout the summer, I was asked to think about the relationship between objects and the people who use or used them. Through different human interactions, objects take on a life of their own, carrying hidden narratives, symbols, and meanings. In the context of the Civil War Defenses of Washington, it's worthwhile to consider land as an object. At these forts, the land has been the main force that connects these sites to the Civil War. The land has both shaped and been shaped by the people who interacted with it. Much like buildings, artifacts, and memorials, the land has a narrative of its own, holding different meanings for different people.



The land upon which Fort Stevens was built on holds a multitude of different meanings. Photo courtesy Keira Koch.

Fort Stevens is one of the many forts Civil War Defenses oversees. While the fort is heavily connected to the Civil War and the battle that was fought there, the land Fort Stevens was built on holds a multitude of different meanings. During its period serving as a Civil War Union fort, the land was directly linked to the military and war. To those who interacted with it, the land served as a stronghold and defense against Confederate forces. The land was also a battleground, a place where Union soldiers held off Confederate forces, squashing an attempt to invade Washington. To many, the land is a symbol of a Union victory as well as a sacred ground, where soldiers fought and died. However, before, during, and after the war, this land was also someone's home.

A free African-American woman, Elizabeth Proctor Thomas, owned and lived on the land Fort Stevens was built on. In September 1861, Union troops took possession of her land and destroyed her home, barn, orchard, and garden to build Fort Stevens. During the destruction of her property, a man who is believed to be President Lincoln offered her words of comfort. To Mrs. Thomas, the land held a different meaning; it symbolized the loss and destruction of her home as well as a place of union, a place where a president forged a bond with an African American woman. Mrs. Thomas' encounter with Lincoln forever shaped her perception of the Civil War and the president. After the war, she spoke fondly of Lincoln and sold a portion of her land to preserve the remaining earthworks and establish a park.

The Civil War Defense of Washington uses the land Fort Stevens resides on to share both of these two narratives. This year the park just recently commemorated the 154th anniversary of the Battle of Fort Stevens. In September, another event will be held to remember Mrs. Thomas and her contribution to the war and local community. Through Thomas's story, Fort Stevens continues to remind visitors of the complex relationships people have with the land and the various meanings and stories hidden within it.



Keira Koch and Emily Vega at the 154th Battle of Fort Stevens Commemoration. Photo courtesy Keira Koch.

