

Fort Scott — Past, Present, and Future

By ROY C. BREWER

LINKS WITH THE PAST

Living with an honest-to-goodness Civil War fort literally in your front yard produces mixed feelings. There is a proud sense of treading daily on historical ground. But at the same time there is a vague feeling of guilt, of somehow being a party to desecrating the remains of the past.

My interest in old Fort Scott began several years ago as I watched the bulldozer grade down one back corner of the embankment to prepare the site for my home. After a rain I would follow the 'dozer in my rubber boots, looking for artifacts exposed in the washed earth. Each bit of pottery, colors still bright under the cracked glaze, set me to wondering whether, a hundred years ago, this dish had been used by an officer or an enlisted man, this cup held coffee with or without chicory, this bowl was used for rice, grits, or cracked wheat.

My interest (and my neighbors') in old Fort Scott continued through the reading of Barnard's *Defenses of Washington* and McClure's more recent treatment of this material for the National Park Service. Then came C. B. Rose, Jr.'s "Civil War Forts in Arlington"¹ published in the *Arlington Historical Magazine*. And finally Jon Magnusson's "Fort Scott"² published in the same magazine. Added to this were talks on the subject made by Ludwell Montague and others.

Here was a wealth of inviting information, together telling all that was known about this historic site which I now shared with several other residents. All, that is, except a square (the equivalent of two small lots) saved from developers by the County. In this area ran the two shoulders of the fort to its point.

All the contours are softened, the parapet rounded to a gentle mound about five feet above the fort's floor and the ditch filled in to within about five feet of the outside ground level. There is no sign of the raised earthen gun platforms, nor of the matching embrasures that had been cut down into the parapet. All evidence of structures within the fort is gone, the barracks, officers' quarters, magazines, guard- and well-house, well and flagpole. The entire area of the fort is grown over with several varieties of oak, some up to 18 inches in diameter. There is a thick undergrowth of cherry, locust, beech, tulip, maple, dogwood, hickory, sassafras, persimmon, pine, viburnum, and blackgum.

With only a short length of the embankment and ditch remaining, and

¹ *Arlington Historical Magazine*, Vol. 1, No. 4, Oct. 1960.

² *Arlington Historical Magazine*, Vol. 2, No. 4, Oct. 1964.

these deeply eroded, how could the various features of the fort be located on the ground?

TWO VERSIONS

First, there were two drawings of the fort on file at National Archives, both with the same date (Jan. 1866) but differing in scale and in some detail (number of platforms/gun positions, number and type of armament, number of interior features, over-all dimensions of the fort's circumference and width of parapet and ditch). Which represented some stage in the fort's planning or development and which represented its final form?

Our first reaction was to choose that one with the greater number of gun positions as depicting the completed installation. Also, its larger scale permitted more accurate measurements. Number and type of armament was not determining since at least seven different listings are noted in the records, varying up and down from a total of four pieces to eleven.

Let us then bring each old drawing to a scale matching that of the present plat maps and then see how these, overlaid, would match out in elevations (high point of mid-parapet and low point of mid-ditch). But current plat maps showed contours only of the relatively short sections of perimeter now remaining, insufficient to firmly fix the entire circumference. Through courtesy of the County Surveys and Highway Divisions, as well as local surveyors, it was possible to obtain some older plat maps. A mosaic of these now reconstituted contours of the fort as it existed some twenty years ago, happily delineating the embankment and ditch for well over half the fort's total circumference.

Drawing A (Civil War drawing of the fort with the greater number of gun positions) overlaid on our contoured plat map should now match out. But does it? Not quite. Oddly, there is found a greater distance (averaging 4½ feet) between the high point of mid-parapet and the low point of mid-ditch on contours of the plat map than that corresponding distance on the original drawing (displacement of 1'4" inward and 3'2" outward).

Then we overlay Drawing B (Civil War drawing of the fort with the lesser number of gun positions) and here the match is better. Yet it varies slightly and in both directions. Were we wrong in our first choice?

Someone mentioned the possible effects of erosion and we think long about that. By measuring a cross-section of the existing embankment and ditch and comparing differences in elevation with those shown in the Civil War drawings, we find that height of the embankment above the floor of the fort has decreased over the years by almost four feet. Likewise, the bottom of the ditch now is slightly more than four feet above the original level. So, a lot of earth has worn away from the parapet's top and a lot has fallen into the ditch; that could have been expected. But why the subsequent and lateral displacement of the high and low points?

Another look to compare the original and existing cross-sections and we

evolve a nice theory that makes Drawing A fit again: there is spill into the ditch from both sides but more from the inside (the higher bank), thus leaving the outside of the ditch to fill at a slower rate; the original top of the parapet peaked toward the inside and, although weathering would round off both corners, the high point would end up inward from the original mid-point.

Still only a theory, and how could we confirm it? By courtesy of Colonel Joe Mitchell, Museum Curator of the restored Fort Ward in neighboring Alexandria, we read the report of the archeologist who was their technical advisor. In his work of preparing a sample restoration for the City's guidance, Mr. Larrabee excavated a cross-section of parapet and ditch to compare with that of the 1865-recorded survey. And, lo and behold, he found a subsequent and lateral displacement between the high point of mid-parapet and the low point of mid-ditch totaling five feet (one foot inward and four feet outward). Let us stop there!

Satisfied that our choice of Drawing A best fitted the existing contours of the fort (allowing for erosion), could we ignore interior detail shown only on Drawing B? Guided by the doctrine that it was better to have too much rather than too little, we went back and borrowed what seemed like important things missing from Drawing A (well and guard-house and flag-pole). This gave us a composite, incorporating features of both drawings, and only considerable digging can prove us wrong.

Someone is sure to point out that, with latitude and longitude of the flagpole given in Barnard's data, and with bearings of each segment of the fort's sides recorded in the Civil War drawing, why not work these figures against a presently surveyed point in the area? True, the location of the fort's flagpole was given as Latitude $38^{\circ}50'48.24''$ and Longitude $77^{\circ}03'17.0''$, and that appears quite specific. But $0.1''$ of latitude turns out on the ground and in this area to be a distance of ten feet and of longitude to be eight feet. Moreover, it was found that the transfer of coordinates given on the Civil War maps unaccountably requires a constant correction of plus $1459'$ in longitude and plus $271'$ in latitude to match current U.S. Geological Survey data for an identifiable feature common to both maps. Even the item "Flagstaff 3.996 miles from Capitol Dome" left us, in the last significant figure, no closer than five feet to the flagpole's position.

Bearings of the fort's segments, recorded in readings to only the nearest one-half degree, would permit in that range a divergence, within the distance of one segment's length ($206'$), of an arc $1'10''$ in width. This much possible error, if additive for each segment, could give us a fort whose sides would not close.

Doubts thus cast on old survey data led us to depend on the method of overlay where high and low points were matched by eye. This procedure is known as the "Sanders-Brewer Orientation by Flotation."

One additional step remained. There were also drawings on file at National Archives which, under the heading of Quartermaster Property, showed structures housing functions in support of the Civil War forts but located outside their perimeter (e.g., barracks, mess houses, officers' quarters, stables, cook houses, guard house, offices, commissary store, Ordnance Sergeant's quarters). But, for Fort Scott, the locations of only two out-buildings were shown. Our presumption, then, was that the large size of this fort, coupled with the company-sized contingent manning it, allowed room inside for most of the required functions. The location of one structure (8'x16' in floor plan) was some 250' N.E. of the fort's gorge, and that of the other (16'x20') some 460' to the E.S.E. No clue is given as to their function. Site of the larger now lies directly under the paving of Fort Scott Drive and half-way down the hill. Site of the smaller building lies at the rear junction of two occupied lots, thus inviting to the prospector.

WHERE IS THE FLAGPOLE?

The obvious challenge now was to test the position of the overlay, to find some definite mark on the ground that would confirm that same feature shown on the Civil War drawing. Pole and plank revetments, gabions and gun platforms had long ago rotted and disappeared. Any corner of the embankment or ditch, or any embrasure in the parapet had so weathered that their boundaries could not be closely fixed. No evidence of above ground structures remained. Underground features (magazines, well) were located on private property.

But perhaps there was some sort of man-made foundation forming the base of the flagpole. Even if only a pole set in a hole in the earth, the darker organic matter constituting the fill would show a clear outline contrasting to the undisturbed clay.

Fortunately, property corners were found conveniently near the flagpole location as shown on the Civil War drawing of the fort. We were, in fact, stumbling over stakes for we were in the area of junction of the County property and that of three private owners. Since the plat map, in overlay, gave us the intersections of property lines, our task was simple. With permission of the County Department of Recreation and Parks, our survey began—measuring, staking, and marking, all in a fair imitation of professionals. But at about that time a housewife (an adjacent owner) stepped out on her back porch and timidly asked, under the circumstances a very logical question: "Are you building a road?" There was time out for an explanation, graciously received, then back to work. In no time at all, here, theoretically, was (had been) the flagpole—dig here!

So we began to dig and, being reasonably uncertain of our yardstick survey, excavated to a few inches depth over an area several yards square. Sure enough, half a brick was unearthed some few feet from our plotted

point. Now this could mean anything or nothing, most likely a brickbat thrown thirty years ago by children in play. But night was falling and thus ended the first day's "dig."

When work resumed, the first spade cut under the half-brick hit another one. Now one must be careful, back away a few feet to loosen the surrounding earth with the spade, and proceed inward with the hand trowel. Soon a second and third brick was exposed, whole ones. Back once more in all directions to loosen the earth to a greater depth, then downward and inward with the trowel. Whatever else, the brick and their arrangement must be laid bare without disturbing their position.

Eventually, with more brick coming into view, it was apparent that the pattern extended even farther away from our beginning. Now we were trespassing on another's property. A quick conference and, with the kind indulgence of the neighbor, back to the digging. Our gathering of small-boy spectators was designated "drummer boys" and forthwith put to work.

After several weeks of intermittent digging, and bailing out collected rainwater in between, our excavation had reached to a depth of about 24 inches. It revealed a design of brick as shown on left margin of the attached drawing. The brick were canted and some obviously disturbed at an earlier date. They extended downward for four courses, some on edge and some flat, the lower three courses serving only to curb the interior opening. It is supposed that the flagpole was set sufficiently deep in the earth and the brick laid around it to form the eight-inch square hole. Only the top layer, presumably then on the surface of the ground, forms the complete pattern. The two opposing short legs of this design were oriented toward the apex and gorge of the fort, with the long leg pointing to the left (southeasterly).

While all of the brick (totalling about 40) lay loosely on one another, there was evidence of mortar (sand aggregates) that must have lost its cement and lime through leaching action. Major surgery was necessary to remove the complete root system of one tree (dead) that had twined itself around and between the brick. Roots from the closer living trees had reached through the brick and down into the central hole which remained damp. Small pieces of metal, rusted beyond identification, were found among and around the brick.

Thus the base of the flagpole was found but not quite where our calculations put it. We can surmise that the Topographical Lieutenant of Engineers located it on his drawing by pacing and, perhaps, after a hard night. Or we might say our work of measuring, scaling, reducing, transcribing, copying and surveying involved an oversight somewhere. While any one point of reference might be located in error, we are confident that positioning and orientation of the fort's drawing, overlaid on the current

AURORA HILLS

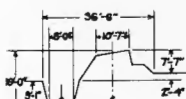
SCALE: 1" = 60'
 SECTIONS 6, 10 & 11
 ARLINGTON COUNTY,
 VIRGINIA

RECORDED CONTOURS

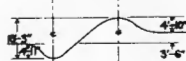
SEC E-F: 1934
 G: 1841
 A-D: 1948
 B-C: 1965

PROFILE X-X/1865

SCALE: 1" = 40'

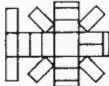


PROFILE X-X/1865



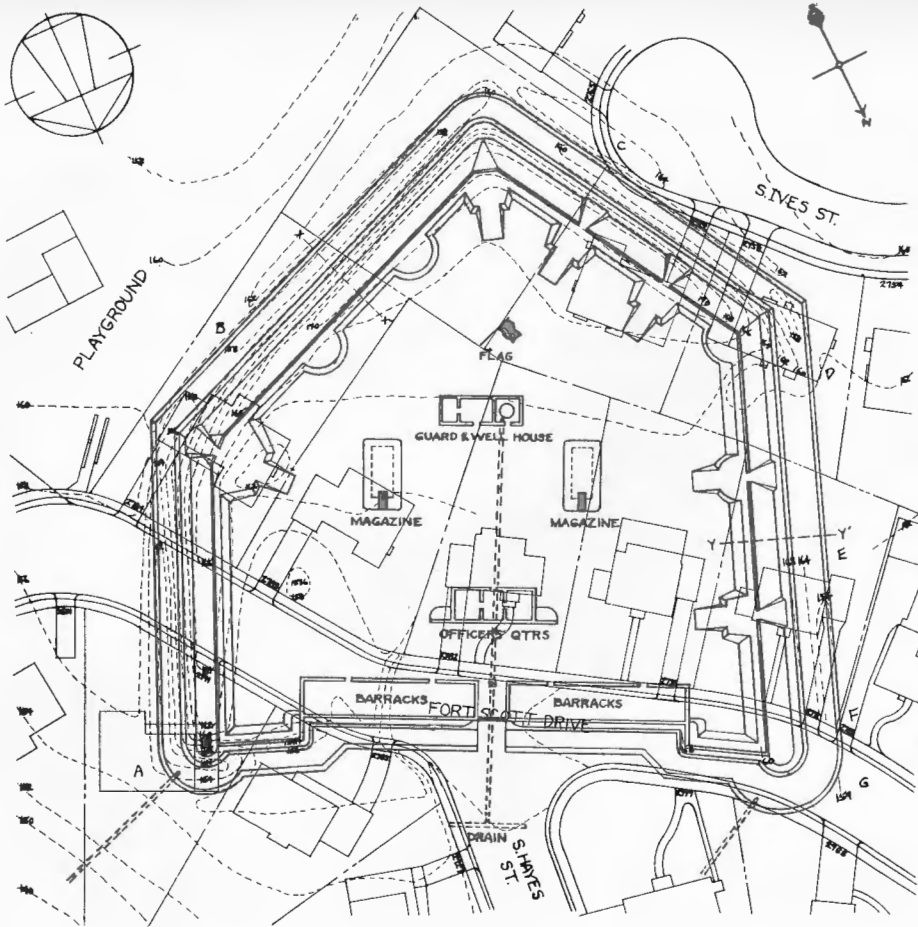
FLAGPOLE BASE (BRICK)

SCALE: 1" = 40'



SOURCES

ARLINGTON COUNTY
 SURVEYS
 CIVIL ENGINEER
 SURVEYS
 PERSONAL SURVEY



FORT SCOTT

SCALE: 1" = 60'
 CONSTRUCTED 1861
 TYPE: LUNETTE

FLAG STAFF

LAT 38°50'48.24"
 LONG 77°03'17.00"
 3.884 MI TO DOME OF CAP
 166.1' EL ABOVE POTOMAC

MANNED BY
 CO 'A' (5TH) REG CONN ARTY

ARMAMENT (VARIED BY TYPE & NO.)

- 1- 8" HOW, SEACOAST CGE
- 1- 32 PDR, SIEGE CGE
- 1- 32 PDR, BARBETTE CGE
- 1- 24 PDR, SIEGE CGE
- 1- 24 PDR, BARBETTE CGE
- 1- 30 PDR FARROTT
- 1- 20 PDR FARROTT
- 1- 6 PDR JAMES RIFLE
- 1- 4 1/2" RODMAN
- 1- 10" SIEGE MORTAR

PROFILE Y-Y'

SCALE: 1" = 40'



SOURCES

NATIONAL ARCHIVES
 ARLINGTON HISTORICAL
 SOCIETY
 PERSONAL SURVEY

Ray E. Drewner 4 Mar 65

plat map, is most soundly based on the principle of matching high and low contour lines/elevations.

FUTURE?

Efforts to preserve Fort Scott go back many years. Of record we have action in 1959 to secure that eastern portion of the earthworks still remaining. Slightly more than half (the western portion) had been obliterated in the development of homes and streets during the 40's. In June of 1959, County officials reported that, to acquire the then remains of the fort (approximately four sizable building lots) would cost an estimated \$30,000 to \$35,000. Moreover, the property owner refused any exchange of land with the County and could be expected to go to court to prevent any division of the area that would hazard his prospects with developers. In July of that same year the Arlington Historical Society wrote to the County officials restating its views. It expressed the desire that the County secure whatever it could of the property, preferably the best-preserved portion of the earthworks lying adjacent to the playground, hoping that the area could be developed as an historic site which would prove of educational value and interest to Arlington residents and visitors. The letter further stated: "We believe that citizens are more likely to take pride and interest in their community if they feel that it has links with the past than if it appears to have sprung full-panoplied from the head of Jove. We are dedicated to the objective of encouraging research into Arlington's history, and preservation of what tangible evidence of that history which remains, to the end that those links with the past will be soundly anchored. Too few of those tangible evidences remain because insufficient knowledge of their existence or indifference to their significance has prevailed hitherto in Arlington."

Subsequent action of the County acquired roughly a square area, approximately 123 feet on the side, adjoining the Fort Scott playground area, and encompassing the apex of the fort. This leaves standing today about 140 linear feet of the original embankment within the County area and an extension of the left wing some 50 feet into the lot of an obliging property owner adjacent.

By initiative of the Arlington County Cultural Heritage Commission, the County has recently approved funds for the placing of historical markers at each of Arlington's Civil War forts. That for Fort Scott will be erected on Fort Scott Drive at the entrance to the playground and is expected to be in place by the time this article is published.

In July of this year the Arlington Historical Society proposed to the Cultural Heritage Commission minor restoration of the remains of Fort Scott as a historic site ready to receive visitors. This plan would provide appropriate recognition for the site but short of any formal (expensive)

measures of restoration (i.e., reshaping of slopes to original contours) and included these recommendations:

a. County acquisition of property from adjacent home owners sufficient to include location of the flagpole base.

b. Erection of fence along two boundaries of the area to protect adjacent property owners from inadvertent damage by visitors.

c. Resetting of old unearthed brick at ground level to form flagpole base in original location and pattern.

d. Mounting of weather- and vandal-proof plaque in fort's interior showing Civil War drawing of fort and with notation "You are here."

e. Procurement of Civil War cannon (or replica) of type actually used in the fort and placement in position in the fort's apex.

f. Erection of footbridge to provide easy entry from the playground area into the fort's interior, providing aid for the elderly and preventing further wearing down of the embankment.

g. Erection of signs to lead visitors off the street (Fort Scott Drive) into the playground parking area, to indicate direction of the fort's access, and to show route into the fort.

The Arlington County Cultural Heritage Commission is sympathetic toward these proposals. It has communicated with Captain Robert C. Giffen, Jr., U.S.N., and Mr. Edward H. Sanders, adjacent property holders, on whose land the base of the flagpole extends. Captain Giffen has offered to donate approximately 200 sq. ft. to the County and Mr. Sanders approximately 57 sq. ft. so that the flagpole base can be included in the site to be developed. Action to accomplish these conveyances is now in process. The Commission will submit to the County Board its recommendations with respect to the other proposals of the Historical Society in time for provision to be made for them in the next County budget.

The small part of Fort Scott which exists today is one of the few remnants of the extensive Civil War fortifications in Arlington to survive our progress in home, business and street development. It is the only one on the south side of the County.

The District, Maryland, and other municipalities of Virginia have restorations of these historic sites in some degree. With the bare trace of a fragment of Fort Scott remaining to us, steadily being worn down by erosion, surrounded on three sides by private property, our challenge today is what Arlington can do to further preserve this link with our past.

As the Arlington parks program expands, might it not tomorrow be possible to fully restore the preserved remnant of this fort—fosse and parapet, gabion and embrasure, abatis and platform, banquette and scarp, all these rich details in the original magnitude of their materials, lines and grades?