

# Alexandria Civil War Defenses of Washington Bike Trail Interpretative Stops

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**This 1863 bird's-eye view of Alexandria depicts the Federal camps and defenses.**

## Alexandria During the Civil War

In 1860, Alexandria was a vibrant southern city boasting a population of 12,652. When South Carolina fired on Fort Sumter on April 12, 1861, and President Lincoln subsequently called for 75,000 troops to crush the rebellion, the mood of Alexandrians shifted dramatically from accommodation to war. On May 23, 1861, citizens went to the polls and voiced their approval of the articles of secession by an overwhelming vote of 958 in favor and 106 against.

Alexandria's strategic importance as a railroad center and port meant that Federal troops lost no time in invading the town on the morning of May 24, 1861. The Federal occupation forever changed the social, cultural and economic fabric of the old seaport town. For four years, the city endured the longest military occupation by Union troops of any town during the conflict. Although there was little fighting near Alexandria, the influx of so many soldiers meant that residents would no longer experience the peace of the antebellum period. Approximately two-thirds of the local population fled the city. Private houses, churches, and local public buildings were commandeered for military barracks, hospitals and prisons. With the expansion of Union occupied territory, African American refugees, most of them escaped slaves, streamed into Alexandria and Washington. They contributed to the Union labor force but also challenged the military's resources and abilities to house and feed the multitudes.

A string of Federal defenses surrounded the capital area, including Alexandria. For pro-Union Alexandrians, these emplacements represented stability and security, while secessionists, in refugee Judith McGuire's bitter expression, loathed their city being "thrown open to a ruthless soldiery." These forts, batteries and cemeteries once dominated the life and landscape of the city. Today, their stories and structures stand as testimony to Alexandria's complex and still-contested role as witness to war and reunion.

## Interpretive Stop #1 Fort Ward

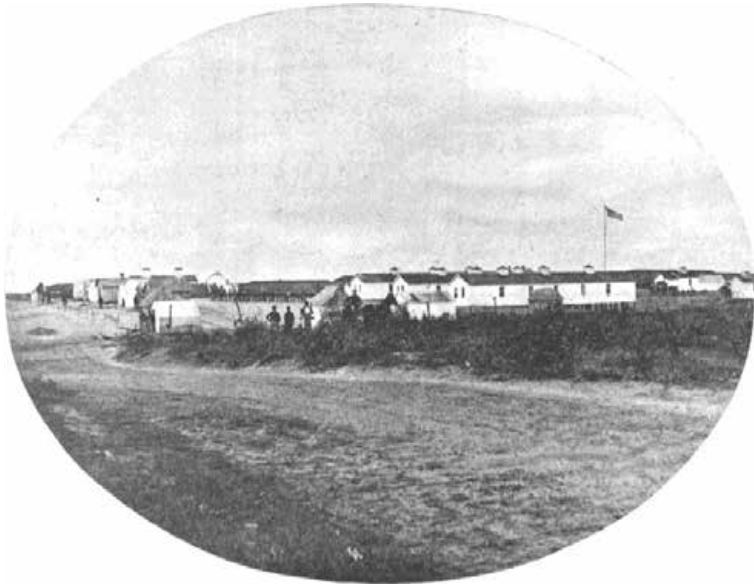
The fort memorialized Commander James Harmon Ward, a native of Hartford, Connecticut. The first Union naval officer killed in the war. He was mortally wounded on June 27, 1861 by gunfire from a Confederate shore battery that was attempting to blockade the Potomac River at Mathias Point.



Naval Historical Center NH66717

Fort Ward was constructed in early September 1861 on the land owned by Phillip Hooff, who owned the property until after the Civil War. The fort guarded the Leesburg and Alexandria Turnpike (modern Route 7) and the country to the north and west toward Bailey's and Balls Cross Roads. Originally, the fort's perimeter was 540 yards with emplacements for 24 guns, and its weaponry in this early period included five 32-pdr. guns, six 24-pdr. guns, and seven 10-pdr. Parrott rifles. By December 1862, plans were put in motion for the addition of a two-gun battery in front of the fort as well as a 100-pdr. Parrott rifle in its southwest corner of the fort.

Despite these improvements, the fort was redesigned and enlarged in 1864 to withstand heavier projectiles. The perimeter was increased to 818 yards making it the fifth largest fort in the Defenses of Washington with a total of 36 gun emplacements. The current site of the museum, near the fort gate, was the location for three barracks, while officers' quarters were situated near the modern park road in front of the museum. Other structures included a mess house, stables, and a privy.



FIRST BATTALION, COMPANIES C, E, AND I,  
FORT WARD, VA.

At the end of the war, Fort Ward was dismantled and salvaged for \$988. Fortunately, ninety-five percent of the fort's earthworks still exist today. The south bastion of the fort was destroyed by modern Braddock Road. The historic site and museum make it one of the premier interpretive sites in the Defenses of Washington that can be visited today. Opened in 1964, the Fort Ward Museum and Historic Site curates a 3,000-object military collection. In addition to site-authentic features like the reconstruction of the northwest bastion and the reconstructed 1865 gate, the grounds contain the museum building, an officers' hut and a restroom facility that are patterned after period buildings within the defenses of Washington. Visitors to the small museum can take a walking tour, which highlights key features of the fort with interpretive signs.

*For more information on Fort Ward, visit [www.fortward.org](http://www.fortward.org)*



**Fort Ward Reconstructed Gate**

After the end of Civil War, the land formerly used by the Union Army for Fort Ward became home to a community of African American families who began settling on the property by the 1870s, if not earlier. This closely knit group of families and their twentieth-century descendents called the neighborhood, "The Fort." Family members continued to own land on the site until the City of Alexandria established Fort Ward Park in the early 1960s. Today, descendents of the

nineteenth and twentieth-century residents of “The Fort” still live in Alexandria. A project is now underway to rediscover and interpret the history of these families and document evidence of their lives and burial sites that still exist in the landscape. Through oral histories, public records, historic maps, and archaeological investigation Fort Ward’s layer landscape of history continues into the future.

## Interpretive Stop #2

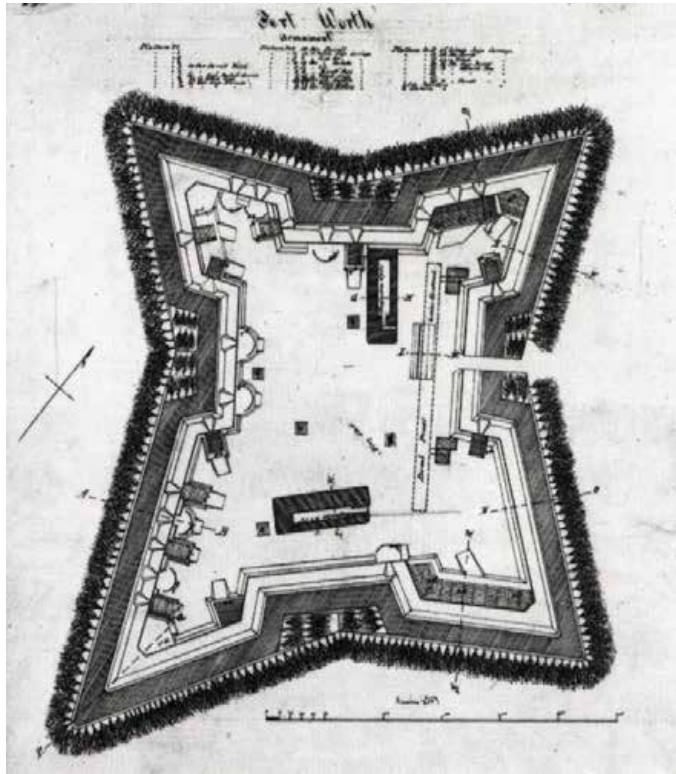
### Fort Worth



**William Jenkins Worth, LC-USZ62-77230 1**

This fort was named in honor of Brigadier General William Jenkins Worth, a veteran of the Black Hawk War, the Cherokee removal, the Second Seminole War, and the Mexican War. The general was appointed commander of the Department of Texas shortly before his death, upon which his name was given to the defensive work and future metropolis of Fort Worth, Texas.

In September 1861, the fort's construction began on property owned by William Silvey. In his report, General Barnard noted, "Fort Worth occupies a very commanding position. A larger work would have been desirable, but the site would not have permitted it." With a perimeter of 463 yards, the fort had space for 25 gun emplacements. The armament of the fort included eight 24-pdr. guns, five 12-pdr. howitzers, five 4.5-inch Rodmans, two 20-pdr. Parrott rifles, two 12-pdr. Whitworth rifles, four 10-inch mortars, and two 24-pdr. Coehorn mortars. A 100-pdr. Parrott rifle was mounted in the corner of the south bastion that could sweep the sector from Fort Lyon around to Fort Ward.



**Engineer Plan of Fort Worth, National Archives**

After the war, former Confederate Colonel Arthur Herbert built his home on the site, and legend says he used the sturdy walls of the south powder magazine as a cellar. The fort was destroyed for residential development in 1970. Unfortunately, today there are no extant remains of the earthen fort, which was situated on and east of the current cul-de-sac at the end of Harris Street.



**Fort Worth Historic Marker**

## Interpretive Stop #3A

### Fort Ellsworth

The fort was named to honor Colonel Elmer E. Ellsworth the commander of the 11th New York Zouaves. Ellsworth, a staunch Lincoln supporter and confidant, died on May 24, 1861, during the federal occupation of Alexandria when he attempted to remove a secessionist flag from the roof of Marshall House Hotel that once stood on the southeast corner of King and Pitt Streets.



**Elmer Ellsworth** (*The Photographic History of The Civil War, Vol. One. The Review of Reviews Co., New York. 1911.*)

Construction on Fort Ellsworth started on May 25, 1861. As the Union line of forts moved west to higher ground, Fort Ellsworth acted as a secondary line of defense when forts Worth, Williams, Ward, and Lyon were built. Together with two blockhouses and a battery located in the Hunting Creek Valley, the fort closed the gap between Forts Lyon and Williams and helped prevent the enemy from establishing batteries on the more elevated heights across Cameron Run valley. The fort's perimeter was 618 yards with emplacements for 29 guns. The armament included nine 8-inch seacoast howitzers, three 24-pounder guns, four 6-pounder field guns, one 100-pounder Parrott, and two 24-pounder Coehorn mortars. Soldiers' barracks stood on the east side of the fort and a large brick house owned by the Dulany family was commandeered for use as a headquarters, regimental hospital, and barracks.



**Fort Ellsworth looking West, National Archives**



**Excavation on Shuter's Hill (AX175) with the George Washington Masonic Memorial in the background (Alexandria Archaeology)**

Today, faint tracings of the parapet and ditch are visible along the middle of the north wall and southeast bastion of the fort. The outline of the northeast bastion, east wall, and east bastion can be seen by following the dark green grass of the filled-in ditch. If you have time to tour the George Washington Masonic Memorial, the angles of Fort Ellsworth's bastions can be seen clearly from the observation deck at the top of the memorial.

**Interpretive Stop #3B**  
**Mathew Brady Photograph**



**Camp of the 44<sup>th</sup> New York Infantry, National Archives**

Go to the foot of the main steps to the Masonic Memorial to visit a panoramic photograph of 1864 Alexandria taken near that location on Shuter's Hill. The photograph shows the "model" military camp of the 44<sup>th</sup> New York Infantry. Upon Elmer Ellsworth's death in Alexandria, the regiment was raised in honor of Elmer Ellsworth and was known as "Ellsworth Avengers."

As you face the panoramic photograph, the area in the valley to your left extending down the hill onto lower ground is the site of the first Camp Convalescent, or "Camp Misery." In the winter of 1862, 10,000-15,000 soldiers were gathered in this temporary camp. Many of the soldiers were sick without blankets, winter coats, or proper shelter. After several Union soldiers froze to death, a congressional investigation closed the camp and a new convalescent camp was established near Fort Richardson.

## Interpretive Stop #4 Alexandria National Cemetery



Established on four acres of farmland, Alexandria National Cemetery, originally called Soldiers' Cemetery, was among the first 14 national cemeteries dedicated by Abraham Lincoln in 1862. The cemetery is the final resting place for nearly 3,600 Federal soldiers. *The Roll of Honor. Names of Soldiers, Victims of the Rebellion, Buried in the National Cemetery at Alexandria.* Washington: Government Printing Office, 1866, includes 2267 white Federal soldiers, 2 Federal Seamen, 229 United States Colored Troops, 2 females, and 1 male citizen. The cemetery also contains the remains of four civilian employees of the U.S. Quartermaster Department who drowned in the Potomac River in April 1865 while in pursuit of Lincoln's assassin, John Wilkes Booth. A commemorative stone dedicated in 1922 marks their grave.



The "Quartermaster" stone marker.

## USCT Burial Petition

Approximately 229 Civil War African-American soldiers are buried in a separate area in the southern section of the cemetery. Prior to January 1865, African-American soldiers were buried in Freedmen's Cemetery. In December 1864, a petition by convalescing U.S. Colored Troops (USCT) resulted in the decision by the military government to allow USCT burials at National Cemetery. African-American soldiers that had been buried in Freedmen's Cemetery were reinterred Soldiers' Cemetery. This part of their petition:

*Louverture General Hospital,  
Alexandria, Va. December 27, 1864  
To Major Edwin Bentley,  
Surgeon in Charge*

*Sir, we the undersigned Convalescents of Louverture Hospital & its Branches and soldiers of the U.S. army, learning that some dissatisfaction exists in relation to the burrial of colored soldiers, and feeling deeply interested in a matter of so great importance to us, who are a part and parcel with the white soldiers in this great struggle against rebellion, do hereby express our views, and ask for a consideration of the same.*

*We learn that the government has purchased ground to be used exclusively for Burrial of soldiers of the United States Army, and that the government has also purchased ground to be used for the burial of contrabands, or freedmen [...] We are not contrabands, but soldiers of the U.S. Army, we have cheerfully left the comforts of home, and entered into the field of conflict, fighting side by side with the white soldiers, to crush out this God insulting, Hell deserving rebellion.*

*[...] We ask that our bodies may find a resting place in the ground designated for the burial of the brave defenders, of our countries flag;*

*It has been said that the colored soldiers desire to be burried in the Contrabands Cemetary, we have never expressed such a desire, nor do we ask for any such distinction to be made [...]*

Nearly 400-names appear on the petition signed by convalescents of the U.S. Colored Troops. The full letter and petition can be seen at:

<http://www3.alexandriava.gov/freedmens/pdf/ConvalescentSoldiersBurialLocation.pdf>

More than 120 United States Colored Troops (USCT) were removed from the Contrabands and Freedmen Cemetery and reburied at Alexandria National Cemetery. This process started January 6, 1865. These men and more than 100 additional African American and Native American Civil War soldiers are buried in the USCT section of Alexandria National Cemetery.



**Soldiers' Cemetery, 1865, LC-B8171-7256**

Since the Civil War, the cemetery has undergone many changes. Around 1870 the picket fence gave way to a stone wall, and in 1876, the pine markers were replaced with marble headstones. The entrance gates are now made of wrought and cast iron. In 1887, in addition to a new utility building, a superintendent's lodge was constructed to replace the original structure that burned down in 1878. According the Department of Veterans Affairs, the cemetery is currently closed to further interment.

## Interpretive Stop #5 Freedmen's Cemetery

As Federal troops extended their occupation of Confederate held territory during the Civil War, enslaved people escaped their bondage and sought refuge behind the Union lines in towns like Alexandria. The U.S. government used the term “contrabands” to deal with a legal and military problem at the beginning of the Civil War. When enslaved peoples started escaping from their owners by fleeing into Union-held places, U.S. law required that they be returned under the conditions of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. However, Union officers thought it short-sighted to help the Confederacy by returning individuals who could aid secessionists. The concept of contraband of war—property taken during war from the enemy—became a useful method of categorizing slaves who escaped or were taken behind Union lines. In this manner, escaped slaves did not have to be legally returned. Those who had fled to Union-occupied lands escaped their owners, but were not legally free. Over time, with the Emancipation Proclamation and Thirteenth Amendment, there was a legal basis for the free status of those who escaped during the war, as well as those who eventually became free as the Union forces advanced through the South and the war ended. The common soldier called escape slaves “Contrabands.”

Beginning in 1862, Alexandria endured what has been described as a refugee crisis. According to one source, the population of Alexandria had exploded to 18,000 by the fall of 1863—an increase of 10,000 people in 16 months.



**African American laborers at Alexandria, National Archives**

Freedmen also encountered sickness, disease, and death due to horrible living conditions and poverty when they moved to Alexandria. They lived in abandoned buildings, hastily assembled huts and shantytowns in which influenza, smallpox and typhoid outbreaks were prevalent. By 1864, a new burial ground was needed. In January 1864, the Federal government seized property at the corner of S. Washington and Church streets, and a cemetery for contraband and freedmen opened in March. The site became the final resting place of nearly 1,800 individuals. More than half of those buried at the cemetery are children under the age of sixteen.

In the decades after its 1869 abandonment by the federal government, the cemetery underwent much abuse, desecration and destruction. The *Washington Post* reported in the 1890s that a nearby brickyard quarried clay from the site which caused human remains to be visible on the

surface and coffins to protrude from the sides of the cemetery. It is probable, however, that families continued to bury and maintain the cemetery into the twentieth century.



In 1955, a gas station was constructed on the site. In 1987, the cemetery's existence was rediscovered through primary-source research, and in 2004 and 2007, City archaeologists identified grave locations to protect them. The Contrabands and Freedmen's Cemetery Memorial is currently being planned. At the memorial, more than 500 graves will be marked and all known names of the buried will be honored on bronze panels.



**Rows of grave shafts uncovered along the south side of the cemetery**

On May 12, 2007, Alexandria gathered to rededicate the Freedmen's Cemetery. Each of the 1,800 known people buried at the site were memorialized with a luminary bag decorated by children from local schools and youth organizations.

The Contrabands and Freedmen Cemetery Memorial was dedicated on the site in 2014. For more information, visit [Alexandriava.gov/FreedmenMemorial](http://Alexandriava.gov/FreedmenMemorial).

## Interpretive Stop #6A and 6B Battery Rodgers

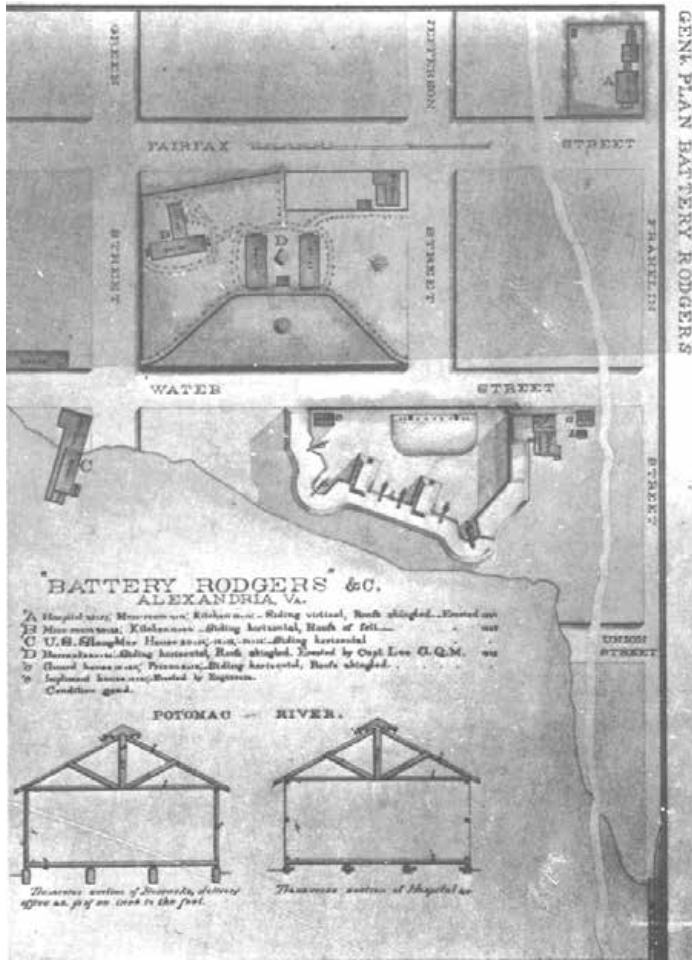


Battery Rodgers was named for U.S. Navy Captain George Washington Rodgers, who was killed on August 17, 1863, during the attack on Fort Wagner, Charleston Harbor, South Carolina. Rodgers commanded the ironclad U.S.S. *Catskill* and was instantly killed by pieces of bolts that fractured when a Confederate solid shot struck the pilohouse.

Built in 1863, nearly half a mile south of the city, Battery Rodgers was located on a 28-foot-high bluff overlooking a cove. The cove has been filled-in to extend the land area that exists today. In cooperation with Fort Foote across the river in Maryland, the battery guarded the Potomac River approach to the capital against enemy ships, as well as Alexandria's southern land approaches.

The original design called for five 200-pdr. Parrott rifles and one 15-inch Rodman gun. The main face of the work was 185 feet long, the flanks 60 and 80 feet. With parapets 25 feet thick, the battery had two magazines that were protected by 17½ feet of earth. A hospital, two barracks, a prison, a mess hall, and a slaughterhouse were located behind the battery.

No visible remains of the battery exist today, but there is a marker at the intersection of South Lee and Green streets near the actual site. A second marker can be found on the waterfront north of the site.



Quartermaster plat for Battery Rodgers, National Archives

## Interpretive Stop #7

### Rest Stop – Ben Brenman Park

**Park Location:** 4800 Brenman Park Drive

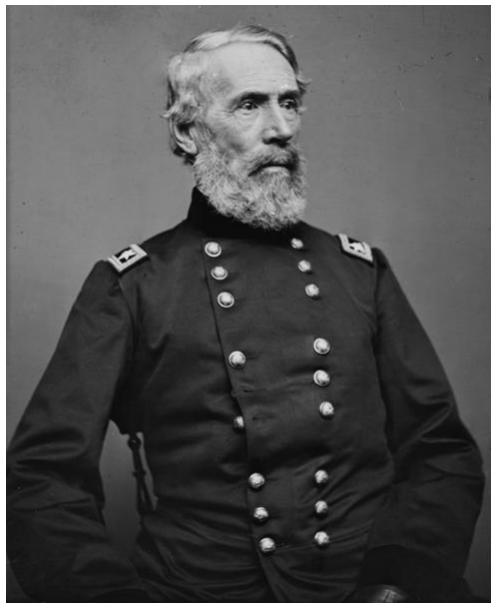
**Park Area:** 50.37 Acres

This west end park is located on the east end of the former U.S. Army base at Cameron Station and is named in honor of the late Colonel Ben Brenman, (US Army-retired) who contributed his time and talent as an Alexandria Community activist for over 30 years. His involvement in scores of projects, including acquisition of this parkland, has enriched the quality of life for citizens of Alexandria. The park features include: Restrooms, Softball field, Little League Baseball field, Soccer field, a lake with gazebo and fountains, pedestrian bridges, and bike trails, fenced dog park, small amphitheatre, seasonal farmers' market and tot lot (playground).

Hours of Operation (April to October): 8am – 8pm Daily

## Camp California

Adjacent to Ben Brenman Park about a half-mile east of Holmes Run Creek was the site of Camp California. This was a very large winter camp that was named to honor General Edwin Sumner who held the position as commander of the District of California before assuming a divisional command in Alexandria.

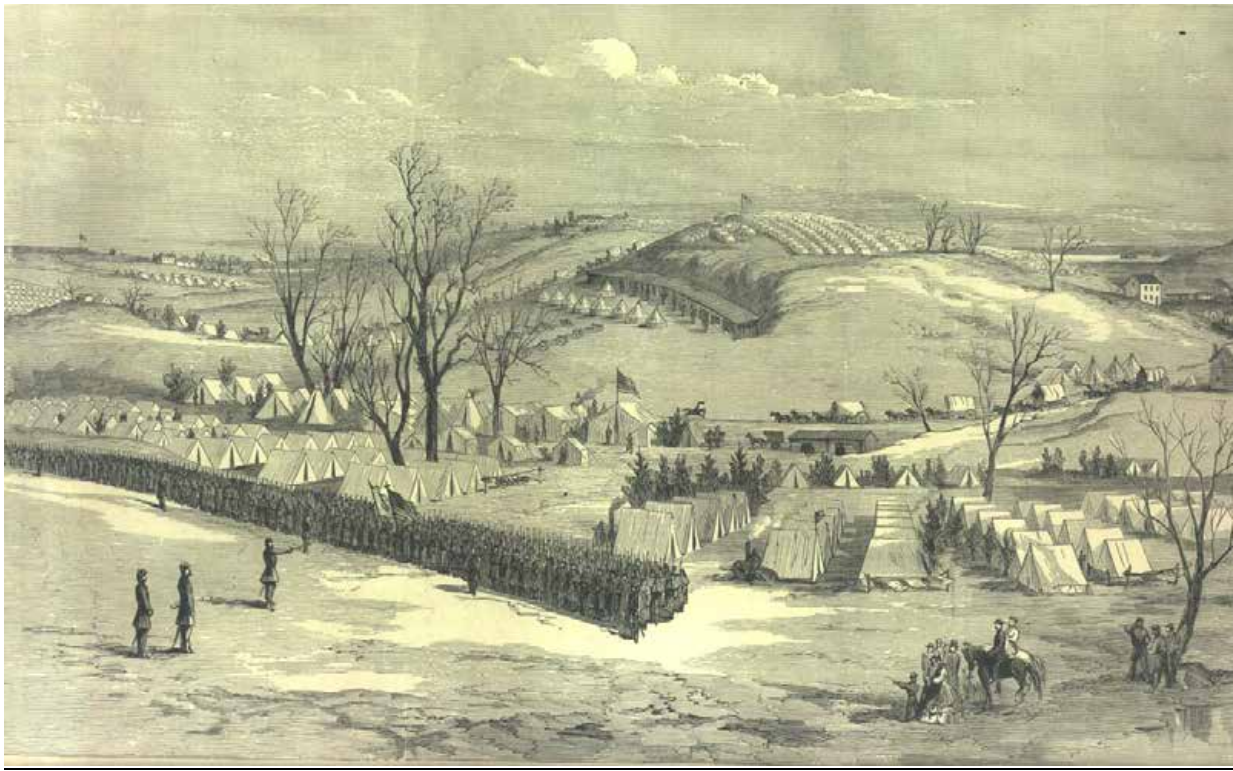


Edwin Sumner, LC-B8172-2227

Frederick, Gilbert described the camp in his book, *The Story of a Regiment, the Fifty-seventh New York State Volunteer Infantry in the War of the Rebellion*. He says:

*Camp California was under the shelter of Fort Worth and was two and a half miles from Alexandria. The Fifty-Seventh occupied a field lying between Fairfax turnpike, the Orange and Alexandria railroad and Cameron Run. An entire division of troops was eventually gathered in this general locality, and designated Sumner's division, being*

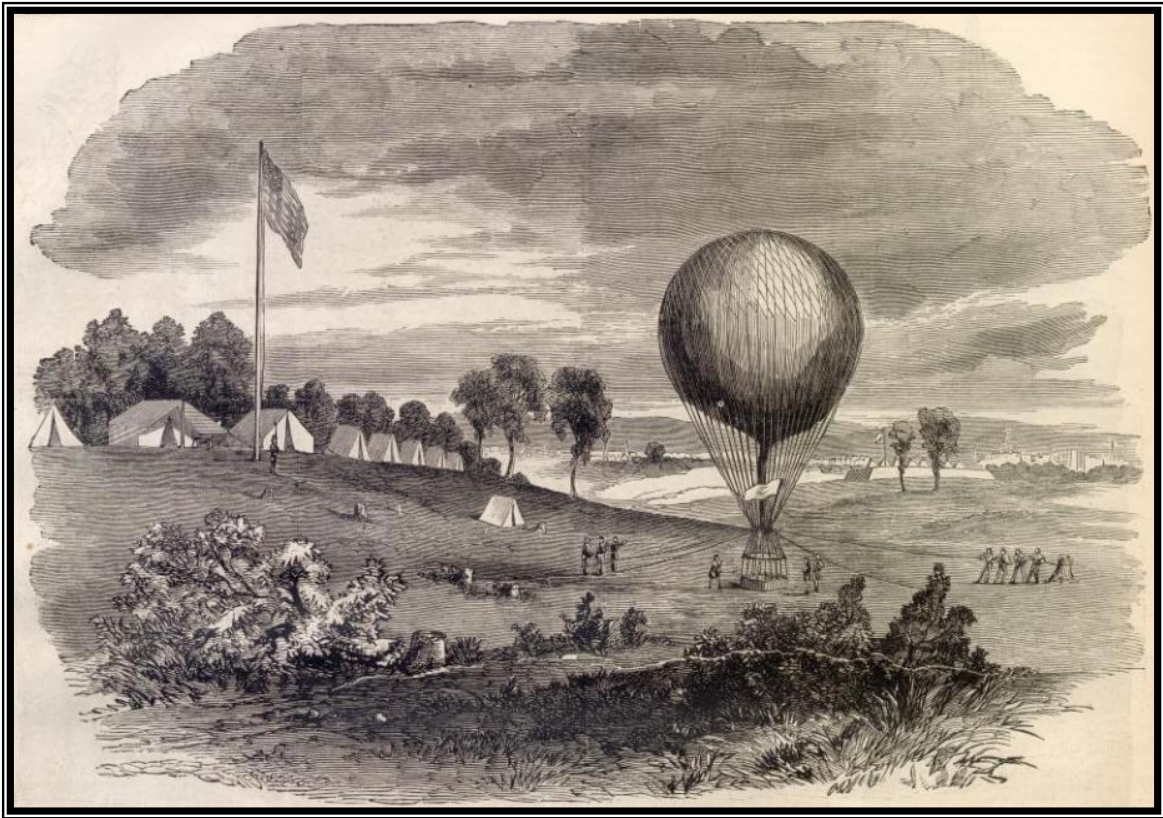
*under the command of General Edwin V. Sumner, to whom here we had our first introduction. It was on December 1st, 1861, that Camp California began a career which was not terminated until March 10th, 1862.*



Wright, Marcus, ed. *Official And Illustrated War Record*. Washington, D.C.: Edward J. Stanley, 1898.

## Site of Balloon Ascensions

North and slightly to the west of Ben Brenman Park across Duke Street was the site of Cloud's Mill. Cloud's Mill was a significant landmark for soldiers stationed in the area. In 1861, a civilian Balloon Corps attached to the Army was created to gather information on Confederate positions and movements from the sky. John La Mountain, one of the civilian balloonists wanted to be selected as Chief Aeronaut to command the Balloon Corps. He advocated free flights dependent on prevailing winds. His competitor for the Chief Aeronaut job was Thaddeus Lowe. Lowe advocated controlled tethered ascensions as a superior method of aerial observation. La Mountain transported his two balloons to Alexandria and established his headquarters at Cloud's Mill along Holmes Run. On October 4, 1861, La Mountain made his first recorded flight from Alexandria and he made at least seven other ascensions. In 1862, he was discharged for insubordination but his record of balloon reconnaissance is one of the many diverse military activities that Alexandria saw in its four years of Federal occupation.



One of Thaddeus Lowe's balloons at Arlington Heights, *Harper's Weekly*, October 26, 1861