

Competing Demands: Managing Cultural, Natural, Recreation, and Historic Resources in Fort Ward Park

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Meaningful and sacred space

FORT WARD PARK IS A COMPLICATED ASSET for the city of Alexandria, VA. Every square foot of Fort Ward Park is in demand—for historic interpretation and preservation, for recreation and as one of the largest urban forests in the city. Rich in historical and natural resources, the 36.5-acre portion of the 43.46-acre park that was acquired to preserve and reconstruct the Civil War fort is fraying. The park is heavily used as a citywide and regional passive recreation destination for birding, walking, and picnicking, for commemorative Civil War events, and for recent interpretation of the African American community that once made their home on the site (Figure 1).

Fort Ward Park has a complicated history. From its possible use as farmland or pasture in the middle 1800s, the site became a Civil War-era military stronghold established as part of the Defenses of Washington that ringed the Union capital of Washington, DC, Fort Ward is the fifth largest of the 164 earthen fortifications that comprised the system, including 68 enclosed forts and 93 fortified field artillery positions. The African American community, “The Fort” community, grew up around the earthen fortification during the war. When the fort was abandoned, many families remained at the site and worked at nearby institutions such as the Virginia Theological Seminary and Episcopal High School. Physical evidence of the former community includes archaeological sites, burial sites, plantings, and road traces.

Acquisition of the site by the City of Alexandria began in the 1950s as the construction of Interstate 395 (Shirley Highway) began making this land valuable for future development. Fort Ward Park was created to both preserve the earthworks and reconstruct a portion of the fort for the upcoming Civil War Centennial, as well as establish a public park and open space.¹ Park features include late nineteenth century and early twentieth century African American historical

Citation: Weber, Samantha, ed. 2016. *Engagement, Education, and Expectations—The Future of Parks and Protected Areas: Proceedings of the 2015 George Wright Society Conference on Parks, Protected Areas, and Cultural Sites*.

Hancock, Michigan: George Wright Society.

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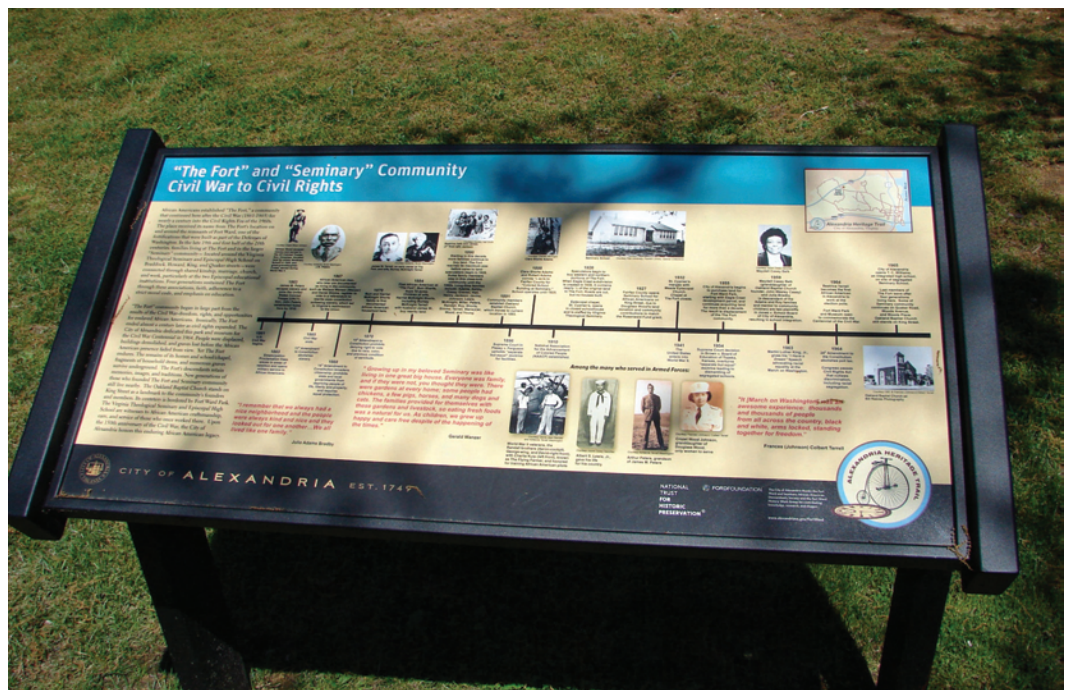


Figure 1. “The Fort” community, recent installation of interpretive panel at Fort Ward Park.

sites, approximately 90–95% of the earthworks of the Civil War fort and associated features like the outlying battery and rifle trench (Figure 2), a Civil War Museum, and an amphitheater, picnic areas, a playground, a dog exercise area and a 0.6 mile long marked walking loop.

Seven years of conflict and controversy

Around 2007, the park and its use, future, ownership and management became highly controversial within parts of the community. Community and neighbors’ concerns were originally brought to the city’s attention because of perceived overuse—loud gatherings with amplified music, parking issues, and trash. Fort Ward’s immediate neighbors objected to the city’s gradual transformation of the park’s eastern edge into a maintenance yard for the park department.

At the same time, attention was refocused on the history of the African American community that inhabited the site following the Civil War until the 1960s, when the park was established. Prior to the city’s acquisition of the site, members of “The Fort” community buried family members on residential property or in a church-owned cemetery near the park site. Most of the gravesites were no longer visible in the park. Families remembered visiting gravesites, but few markers remained outside of a church cemetery that is surrounded on three sides by park property. Although marked and visible, the church cemetery grounds were experiencing erosion and storm water damage. Finding the locations of the gravesites within the park required research, as documentation was incomplete. Even when noted in an archival record, the available information did not always square with a family’s oral history. Barbara Franco, a consultant team member, counseled us to realize that personal narrative offers the opportunity to gain a wider and more nuanced understanding of our world and the people who inhabit it, not always found in traditional sources. Doing so also requires us to understand and consider “distinctions between facts and meaning, issues of voice and multiple perspective.”²

The City of Alexandria is known nationally for embracing archaeology.³ Initial work at Fort Ward focused on the Northwest Bastion of the fort in the 1960s. In 1991, historical research and archaeological investigations identified evidence for the Civil War barracks east of the fortification, and post-War African American homes, including artifacts and landscaping. Since 2010,



Figure 2. Compacted and eroding soil due to the Civil War rifle trench's use as an informal footpath; note the stump left in place to avoid ground disturbance of the resource.

a series of archaeological investigations has taken place at the park. The work has focused on finding unmarked graves, testing the efficacy of ground-penetrating radar in finding graves at Fort Ward, and finding other potentially significant resources throughout the park.

While these archaeological investigations were underway, the city, recognizing the undocumented resources on the site, appropriately deferred much of their ground-disturbing maintenance activities in the park. No trees were planted after 2010, even when powerful storms raked the site and damaged much of the urban forest. Damaged trees were cut at knee height. No stumps were ground or removed. Erosion continued along road edges, gravesites in the privately owned church cemetery, and in recreation areas. Storm water and erosion repair to the stream channel and rifle trench was on hold. The biggest challenge to park management and natural resource maintenance was ground-disturbing activities. No work could be done until areas within the park were identified by their cultural resource significance. Future interpretation and museum expansion improvements were also on hold.

The city of Alexandria's Office of Historic Alexandria (OHA) and the city archaeologist compiled resource maps and archaeological documentation into a ground-disturbance map that, in conjunction with an updated memorandum of understanding (MOU), serves as the linchpin of the management plan. The ground-disturbing activities map defines areas within the park, and their tolerance for ground disturbance. The one-third of the park that includes the core area of the Civil War fort, and known African American burial sites, prohibits ground disturbing activities, except for the placement of formal interpretive elements (with prior archaeological review and investigation by OHA). Another area of the park where it is suspected that additional resources may be discovered allows for ground disturbance only with further review by OHA (Figure 3). The last area, approximately one-third of the park, allows for minimal ground disturbing activities—eration, stump grinding, tree planting and soft path construction. With the acceptance of the management plan by the city council, site work, restoration, and ongoing maintenance could begin again in specific areas of the park.

Park management issues were not solely related to ground disturbance. Two different entities maintained the park grounds; contracted labor and park operations staff. Contracted labor cared

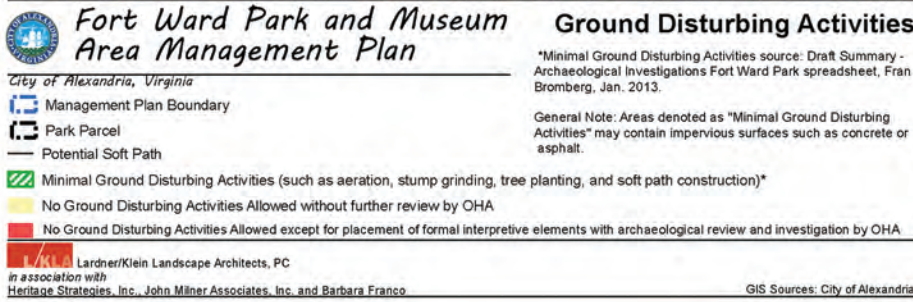


Figure 3. Fort Ward Park cultural resource protection levels: ground disturbing allowances.

for the Civil War fort area due to the fragility of the earthworks, while city park staff maintained the rest of the park that included much of the former “Fort” community. The difference in maintenance practices was apparent, and it confused park visitors. Had the city forgotten to mow? Was the Civil War fort more important than other areas of the park? The casual visitor didn’t understand when they saw one area of the park (the Civil War resources) receiving a higher level of maintenance than other areas.

The park is also complicated by its management structure. In a city populated by 150,000 residents, four city departments are involved in the management and administration of the park: the Department of Recreation, Parks and Cultural Activities; Office of Historic Alexandria; the

Department of Transportation and Environmental Services; and General Services. A memorandum of understanding between departments is in place and is revisited annually.

The management plan development effort was also complicated by a series of parallel studies, each intended to influence the plan contents. One study addressed storm water issues, as many of the gravesites and parklands were eroding, and the stream channel was being damaged. Separately, a history of “The Fort” community and the African American families who lived on the site was underway.

Framework for collaborative work

During this process, the city council appointed a stakeholder advisory group, representing a number of interested parties.⁴ The stakeholder group presented reports to the city council in 2011 and 2012. The second submission identified issues facing the park, and proposed a number of recommendations to address them. Chapters focused on history and culture, recreational use, environmental and natural resources, park operations, planning, development and promotion, Civil War resources, African American cemeteries and burial sites, African American structures and other resources, cultural resources related to the museum and its collections, and programs and management recommendations for the environmental resources at Fort Ward. At this point, the city reached the conclusion that a professional consultant team was needed to help the city develop a park management plan.

Consultant team members struggled to identify a methodology, or model to emulate, to address the complex issues facing the park. Part of the challenge was the size and ownership of the park, a locality. Another was the number of complex and overlapping issues to address related to cultural, natural and recreational resources in a synthetic process. A literature search⁵ produced several suitable models, portions of which contributed to the approach and methodology used to develop the Fort Ward plan.

The city had never developed a management plan for any of its parks. Rather than the more traditional, diagram-style master plans, the Fort Ward Management Plan provides a framework for decision-making. Plan goals include the following:

- provide strategic guidance for improved park management and operations;
- identify sustainable practice strategies for use, protection and monitoring of changes;
- balance management of natural, cultural and recreational resources, earthwork fort, archaeological resources, interments, “The Fort” community, and park features;
- identify potential enhancement opportunities to protect and interpret African American cultural resources and burial sites by developing a “We’re Still Here” trail, and recognizing and demarcating graves and cemeteries;
- upgrade park facilities and recreation infrastructure, public accessibility, and add new plantings;
- redirect and reduce impact of storm water runoff; and
- provide appropriate management zones and related best practices for routine park maintenance and operations.

It is a technical plan, with metrics to measure the success of the implementation of best practices through monitoring; it is a picture book with single page “how to” guides for implementing the plan’s many action items; and it is a blueprint for identifying city budget priorities.

Iterative public process

The audience was expanded beyond the stakeholder advisory group through a series of listening

sessions in the park, a web-based survey, and several open houses. All materials were posted on the city's web site, going back to the project's origin in 2007. The process for the development of the management plan was iterative and open.

Lessons learned

What did we learn? We learned less about cutting-edge techniques or methodologies and more about basic human interaction. Success is all about the people, about gaining trust and being fair. Trust does not come easily when generations of distrust must be overcome. Working with a stakeholder group, while very helpful, has its own challenges. Interest-group representatives do not always reflect the feelings of the group they are representing. Leadership, at the city-level and within the stakeholder group, is essential to progress. Strong committee chairs make a difference. What should we have done differently? One activity would be to have invested in more one-on-one interactions.

Keeping the everyday park user engaged is challenging. By removing the five-acre athletic field portion of the park from the plan, organized sports leagues did not dominate the planning process. As heavy users of the park, their voice was not heard. Similarly, the many users of the passive recreation features of the park, seeing no threat to their activities, were primarily silent. Better engagement of the everyday user would have helped to balance the planning discussions and decision-making process.

The plan development process was a good reminder of how one person's facts are not necessarily another's facts. Better definitions and recognition of this fact would have helped to establish a more open and trusting decision-making process.

Digital communication is not universally embraced, even in 2015. The city's attempt to be green and paperless, although well intentioned, is problematic for open decision-making. The management plan material was complex and challenging for some readers to use solely as a digital document. People were unable or unwilling to print a document that employed color on their home ink jet printer, devoting multiple cartridges to a draft plan document. Others were unfamiliar with attachments and downloading.

Moving forward

Today the plan is moving forward. After years of collaborative work, strong disagreements and responsive changes, the Fort Ward Park and Museum Area Management Plan achieved unanimous support from the Alexandria City Council in January 2015.

The city council has budgeted \$1,300,000 in their ten-year capital improvements plan to implement the park plan's first priority actions. Two hundred thousand dollars of that amount is budgeted for fiscal year 2016 to develop an interpretive plan that tells the story of the park and its heritage, locally, regionally and nationally.⁶ The combination of park resources and their complexity make for a rich telling of the site's story from the Civil War to civil rights.

However, all has not been resolved in such a complex project. More work must be done to gain the full trust of all members. An Ad Hoc Implementation Monitoring Group is being established by the city council and will include one city council member. This action will ensure that many eyes remain on the park and its management activities.

Endnotes

1. Fort Ward Park was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1982.
2. Barbara Franco, "Public History as a Calling Opening Academic Convocation, September 5, 2012," *Seminary Ridge Review* (Gettysburg, PA: Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg, Spring 2013), Volume 15, Number 2.

3. The City of Alexandria established the Alexandria Archaeological Commission in 1975, the first such group in America. The City has full- and part-time archaeologists on staff, operates a field camp for middle school students, a museum and a lab both open to the public.
4. Members included nearby neighborhood associations: Seminary Civic Association; Seminary Hill Association; Parks and Recreation Commission, Environmental Policy Commission, Historic Alexandria Resources Commission; Fort Ward/Seminary African American Descendants Society; Oakland Baptist Church; and citizens at large and a citizen living within one mile of the park.
5. Washington State Parks, “Rasar State Park Management Plan” (July 12, 1997), <http://parks.state.wa.us/340/Rasar>.
6. U.S. Forest Service, Rocky Mountain Research Station, “Wildland Fire in Ecosystems, Effects of Fire on Cultural Resources and Archaeology”, General Technical Report RMRS-GTR-42 (May 2012), Volume 3.