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Fort Negley

Krista Castillo (revised, 1993)

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Profiles of *African Americans* in Tennessee



Fort Negley

On February 25, 1862, following Confederate defeat at Fort Donelson, the Union Army occupied Nashville. In March 1862, President Abraham Lincoln appointed U. S. Senator Andrew Johnson of East Tennessee military governor. Throughout the spring and summer of 1862, Confederate soldiers, irregulars, and civilians threatened to recapture the city. Responding to Johnson's nervous pleas for protection, General Don Carlos Buell commanding the Army of the Ohio, sent Captain James S. Morton, chief engineer, to Nashville with orders to fortify the city. By August, Morton succeeded in designing a series of fortifications but lacked sufficient supplies and manpower. With only about 6,000 soldiers tasked with garrisoning Nashville, Morton identified another available labor source. On August 3, he wired Buell, "Only 150 Negroes so far, no tools, teams, etc. I wanted to employ 825 Negroes by the 11th."

In mid-August, nearly 2,000 free and enslaved blacks, recruited or forced into service in return for certificates of labor to be paid later, commenced construction of Fort Negley, a large fort on the crest of St. Cloud Hill. Workers cleared trees, blasted solid rock, and dug underground magazines. Expert stone masons shaped the stone and laid thick masonry walls. Women washed clothes, cooked food, and hauled debris in wheelbarrows. One observer reported, "To the credit of the colored population be it said, they worked manfully and cheerfully, with hardly an exception, and yet lay out upon the works at night under armed guard, without blankets and eating only army rations" (Fitch, 665).

Morton, although not authorized to issue wages, encouraged his superiors to pay laborers

\$7.00 per month to prevent desertion and to entice enlistment. Staggering rates of desertion; deaths from disease, exposure, and accidents; and confusion among officers over whether to pay laborers or their owners resulted in unpaid wages. Before the project ended, the army owed over \$85,958 in wages. Ultimately only 300 laborers received pay.

On December 7, 1862, laborers completed Fort Negley, the largest inland masonry fortification built during the Civil War. From this impressive structure located 620 feet above the Cumberland River, thousands of soldiers protected the southern approaches to the city. Based on a seventeenth century French design, Fort Negley consisted of three levels of defense, covered four acres, and consumed 62,500 cubic feet of stone and 18,000 cubic yards of dirt.

The twelve-foot high wooden stockade, the topmost structure or third level of defense, contained water cisterns, a telegraph station, observation platforms perched in two tall trees, and rifle turrets resting on each corner. The second level of defense, the inner works comprised of high cut limestone and earthen walls, contained four cannon and two powder magazines. Located below the east and west inner works, soldiers erected tents and small cabins in the ravelin ditches. Four triangular points or salients called redans constructed of earth and stone extended from each ravelin ditch. Each redan supported cannon capable of pivoting 180 degrees. Below the southern inner works, two multileveled bastions containing chambers and tunnels protected by tons of earth, stone, iron and wood, juttied out of the fort. Forming the first level of defense, the redans and the bastions gave the

fort its distinctive star-shaped appearance. On the north side, the entrance or sally port, complete with gateway, a timber guardhouse, and a bomb shelter, overlooked the gently sloping terrain and the city two miles beyond.

Imposing and bristling with eleven guns, Fort Negley successfully deterred direct attacks throughout the war. On November 5, 1862, a delegation of black laborers asked Morton for arms to defend against 1,000 Confederate cavalymen attempting to invade the city from the east. Refusing, he allowed the blacks to form a symbolic defensive line with picks and axes. Union forces including guns installed at Fort Negley drove the Confederates off inflicting sixty-eight casualties. On December 15 and 16, 1864, Fort Negley's guns also participated in the Battle of Nashville.

From February 1862 through December 1864, thousands of troops garrisoned and improved Nashville's five major fortifications, twenty-one minor installations and more than twenty miles of earthworks. At the end of the war, troops dismantled all the defenses, with the exception of Fort Negley, where a small contingent of soldiers remained until the official end of Reconstruction in Nashville in September 1867. The army removed the cannon and sold the iron and timber before abandoning the stone remains.

From 1867 until 1869, the local Ku Klux Klan held secret meetings in the fort's blockhouses. During the early 1900s, local black Republican Party leaders and others unsuccessfully petitioned the federal government to restore the fort. In spring 1935, the Works Progress Administration (WPA), a product of New Deal legislation, hired 1,150 men to restore Fort Negley. Although The Tennessean declared, "Restoration of Fort Negley finally complete" on December 13, 1936, the city delayed opening Fort Negley Park featuring a new parking lot, walkways, and a small museum located in one of magazines until the summer of 1941. While the city maintained the softball and little league diamonds also built by the WPA, the fort fell into ruins and closed in 1945.

The Centennial commemoration of the Civil War, from 1961-1965, revived interest in the site, and the Metro Parks department and volunteers cleared vegetation and debris. In 1975, Fort Negley was listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The Metropolitan Historical Commission installed a plaque at the entrance to the site in 1980, and the Tennessee Historical Commission placed a historical marker noting the involvement of blacks in the Civil War and in the construction of Fort Negley. Throughout the latter part of the twentieth century, local leaders and community activists such as Joe Kelso, pushed for the restoration of the fort. In 1994, the City Council approved \$500,000 to begin restoration of Fort Negley as a historical, tourist, and community resource. Between 2003 and 2007, Nashville spent more than two million dollars completing the first two phases of the 1996 Master Plan. In 2004, a stabilized Fort Negley featuring boardwalks and interpretive panels reopened. The Fort Negley Visitors Center opened in 2007. In 2013, the Fort Negley Technical Advisory Committee oversaw the completion of a Historic Structures Report documenting the fort's complex history, current conditions, and preservation needs. Programming and interpretation at the site includes antebellum Nashville, the city's importance during the Civil War, Reconstruction, the WPA era, African American heritage, and the Civil Rights Movement.

Revised and expanded by
Krista Castillo,
from the 1993 *Profile* by
Bobby L. Lovett

Selected source:

John Fitch. *Annals of the Army of the Cumberland: Comprising Biographies, Descriptions of Departments, Accounts of Expeditions, Skirmishes, and Battles.* Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott & Co., 1864.
