



Did You Know?



Fort Richardson's Signal Tower

Fort Richardson's primary mission during the Civil War was to serve as a principal fortification in the defense of Washington. And importantly, the Fort commanded the highest ground of all the Forts on the Virginia side and proved to be an important link in a network of signal towers providing speedy communications between the other Forts and posts in Virginia and Washington. Shortly after Fort Richardson became operational, the newly established Signal Corps built a signal tower in close proximity to the enclosed Fort and probably about 125 feet in height. The tower provided a clear line of sight to the other towers in the chain of Forts. The signal corpsmen used a simple but effective flag waving communication method. At night, lanterns and torches substituted for the flags. Messages were received and retransmitted to the next Fort in line until they received the intended recipient. The "Wig-Wag" system could transmit up to a paragraph in size within 13 minutes between one station and another via up to four relay stations in between. For example, it would require six transmissions of a signal to send a message from South Alexandria to the Federal Headquarters in Fairfax City. Fort Lyon (now Huntington Metro) would send the message direct to Fort Richardson on the high ground. The Fort Richardson signalman would relay the message to the platform atop the Winders Building (still located on 17th St. just west of the White House). The message would then be retransmitted to the Fort Morton tower at the intersection of Wilson Boulevard and Court House Road. It would take another 3 relays in order to be received at the signal platform atop the Fairfax Court House.

The Fort Richardson signal tower, due to its elevation clear lines of sight, was the central station for relaying messages from other forts onward to stations in Virginia and Washington. From their advantage, Fort Richardson signalmen also played an important intelligence role in observing and gathering information on the movements of Confederate forces south of the Union lines.

The ANCC Foundation has taken the lead for ANCC in researching and documenting the history of the Club. In that vein, the Foundation is now working to publicize and memorialize Fort Richardson. Future DYK's will provide further insight into the history of Fort Richardson and provide progress updates. This undertaking can only be successful with the financial support and volunteer effort of the Club membership. The Foundation is a public charity, an IRS approved 501(C)(3), incorporated to support the legacy and history of ANCC. For further information, contact the ANCC Foundation at www.anccfoundation.org or call 1 (800) 506-2622.

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