



Phase II and Phase III Archaeological Database and Inventory

Site Number: 18AN550

Site Name: Fort Nonsense

Prehistoric

Other name(s) NRHP #84000408

Historic

Unknown

Brief Description:

Possibly late 18th or early through mid-19th century earthen fortification

Site Location and Environmental Data:

Maryland Archaeological Research Unit No. 7

SCS soil & sediment code SaB

Latitude 38.9924 Longitude -76.4586

Physiographic province Western Shore Coastal

Terrestrial site Underwater site

Elevation m Site slope 2%

Ethnobotany profile available Maritime site

Site setting

-Site Setting restricted

-Lat/Long accurate to within 1 sq. mile, user may need to make slight adjustments in mapping to account for sites near state/county lines or streams

Topography

- Floodplain
- Hilltop/bluff
- Interior flat
- Upland flat
- Ridgetop
- Terrace
- Low terrace
- High terrace
- Rockshelter/cave
- Hillslope
- Unknown
- Other

Ownership

- Private
- Federal
- State of MD
- Regional/county/city
- Unknown

Nearest Surface Water

Name (if any) Severn River

- | Saltwater | | Freshwater | |
|--|---|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Ocean <input type="checkbox"/> | Estuary/tidal river <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | Stream/river <input type="checkbox"/> | Swamp <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Tidewater/marsh <input type="checkbox"/> | | Lake or pond <input type="checkbox"/> | Spring <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Minimum distance to water is 600 m | | | |

Temporal & Ethnic Contextual Data:

- Paleoindian site
- Archaic site
- Early archaic
- Middle archaic
- Late archaic
- Woodland site
- MD Adena
- Early woodland
- Mid. woodland
- Late woodland
- Unknown prehistoric context

- Contact period site
- ca. 1820 - 1860 Y
- ca. 1630 - 1675
- ca. 1675 - 1720
- ca. 1720 - 1780
- ca. 1780 - 1820 P
- Unknown historic context
- Unknown context

Ethnic Associations (historic only)

- Native American
- African American
- Anglo-American Y
- Hispanic
- Asian American
- Unknown
- Other

Y=Confirmed, P=Possible

Site Function Contextual Data:

Prehistoric

- Multi-component
- Village
- Hamlet
- Base camp
- Rockshelter/cave
- Earthen mound
- Cairn
- Burial area
- Misc. ceremonial
- Rock art
- Shell midden
- STU/lithic scatter
- Quarry/extraction
- Fish weir
- Production area
- Unknown
- Other context

Historic

Urban/Rural? Rural

Domestic

- Homestead
- Farmstead
- Mansion
- Plantation
- Row/townhome
- Cellar
- Privy

Industrial

- Mining-related
- Quarry-related
- Mill
- Black/metalsmith
- Furnace/forge
- Other

Furnace/forge

Other

Transportation

- Canal-related
- Road/railroad
- Wharf/landing
- Maritime-related
- Bridge
- Ford

Educational

Commercial

- Trading post
- Store
- Tavern/inn

Military

Battlefield

Fortification

Encampment

Townsite

Religious

- Church/mtg house
- Ch support bldg

Burial area

Cemetery

Sepulchre

Isolated burial

Bldg or foundation

Possible Structure

Post-in-ground

Frame-built

Masonry

Other structure

Slave related

Non-domestic agri

Recreational

Midden/dump

Artifact scatter

Spring or well

Unknown

Other context

Interpretive Sampling Data:

Prehistoric context samples

Soil samples taken

Flotation samples taken

Other samples taken

Historic context samples

Soil samples taken N

Flotation samples taken N

Other samples taken



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Diagnostic Artifact Data:

Projectile Point Types			
Clovis	<input type="checkbox"/>	Koens-Crispin	<input type="checkbox"/>
Hardaway-Dalton	<input type="checkbox"/>	Perkiomen	<input type="checkbox"/>
Palmer	<input type="checkbox"/>	Susquehana	<input type="checkbox"/>
Kirk (notch)	<input type="checkbox"/>	Vernon	<input type="checkbox"/>
Kirk (stem)	<input type="checkbox"/>	Piscataway	<input type="checkbox"/>
Le Croy	<input type="checkbox"/>	Calvert	<input type="checkbox"/>
Morrow Mntn	<input type="checkbox"/>	Selby Bay	<input type="checkbox"/>
Guilford	<input type="checkbox"/>	Jacks Rf (notch)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Brewerton	<input type="checkbox"/>	Jacks Rf (pent)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Otter Creek	<input type="checkbox"/>	Madison/Potomac	<input type="checkbox"/>
		Levanna	<input type="checkbox"/>

Prehistoric Sherd Types			
Marcey Creek	<input type="checkbox"/>	Popes Creek	<input type="checkbox"/>
Dames Qtr	<input type="checkbox"/>	Coulbourn	<input type="checkbox"/>
Selden Island	<input type="checkbox"/>	Watson	<input type="checkbox"/>
Accokeek	<input type="checkbox"/>	Mockley	<input type="checkbox"/>
Wolfe Neck	<input type="checkbox"/>	Clemson Island	<input type="checkbox"/>
Vinette	<input type="checkbox"/>	Page	<input type="checkbox"/>
Shepard	<input type="checkbox"/>	Townsend	<input type="checkbox"/>
Minguannan	<input type="checkbox"/>	Sullivan Cove	<input type="checkbox"/>
Shenks Ferry	<input type="checkbox"/>	Moyaone	<input type="checkbox"/>
Potomac Crk	<input type="checkbox"/>	Keyser	<input type="checkbox"/>
Yeocomico	<input type="checkbox"/>	Monongahela	<input type="checkbox"/>
Susquehannock	<input type="checkbox"/>		

Historic Sherd Types		Stoneware	
Earthenware	Ironstone <input type="checkbox"/>	Staffordshire <input type="checkbox"/>	English Brown <input type="checkbox"/>
Astbury <input type="checkbox"/>	Jackfield <input type="checkbox"/>	Tin Glazed <input type="checkbox"/>	Eng Dry-bodied <input type="checkbox"/>
Borderware <input type="checkbox"/>	Mn Mottled <input type="checkbox"/>	Whiteware <input type="checkbox"/>	Nottingham <input type="checkbox"/>
Buckley <input type="checkbox"/>	North Devon <input type="checkbox"/>	Porcelain <input type="checkbox"/>	Rhenish <input type="checkbox"/>
Creamware <input type="checkbox"/>	Pearlware <input type="checkbox"/>		Wt Salt-glazed <input type="checkbox"/>

All quantities exact or estimated minimal counts

Other Artifact & Feature Types:

Prehistoric Artifacts			
Flaked stone	<input type="checkbox"/>	Other fired clay	<input type="checkbox"/>
Ground stone	<input type="checkbox"/>	Human remain(s)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Stone bowls	<input type="checkbox"/>	Modified faunal	<input type="checkbox"/>
Fire-cracked rock	<input type="checkbox"/>	Unmod faunal	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other lithics (all)	<input type="checkbox"/>	Oyster shell	<input type="checkbox"/>
Ceramics (all)	<input type="checkbox"/>	Floral material	<input type="checkbox"/>
Rimsherds	<input type="checkbox"/>	Uncommon Obj.	<input type="checkbox"/>
		Other <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Prehistoric Features			
Mound(s)	<input type="checkbox"/>	Storage/trash pit	<input type="checkbox"/>
Midden	<input type="checkbox"/>	Burial(s)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Shell midden	<input type="checkbox"/>	Ossuary	<input type="checkbox"/>
Postholes/molds	<input type="checkbox"/>	Unknown	<input type="checkbox"/>
House pattern(s)	<input type="checkbox"/>	Other	<input type="checkbox"/>
Palisade(s)	<input type="checkbox"/>		
Hearth(s)	<input type="checkbox"/>		
Lithic reduc area	<input type="checkbox"/>		

Lithic Material			
Jasper	<input type="checkbox"/>	Fer quartzite	<input type="checkbox"/>
Chert	<input type="checkbox"/>	Sil sandstone	<input type="checkbox"/>
Rhyolite	<input type="checkbox"/>	Chalcedony	<input type="checkbox"/>
Quartz	<input type="checkbox"/>	Ironstone	<input type="checkbox"/>
Quartzite	<input type="checkbox"/>	Basalt	<input type="checkbox"/>
		Argilite	<input type="checkbox"/>
		Steatite	<input type="checkbox"/>
		Other	<input type="checkbox"/>
		Sandstone	<input type="checkbox"/>

Dated features present at site

19th century earthen fortifications

Historic Artifacts			
Pottery (all)	<input type="checkbox"/>	Tobacco related	<input type="checkbox"/>
Glass (all)	<input type="checkbox"/>	Activity item(s)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Architectural	<input type="checkbox"/>	Human remain(s)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Furniture	<input type="checkbox"/>	Faunal material	<input type="checkbox"/>
Arms	<input type="checkbox"/>	Misc. kitchen	<input type="checkbox"/>
Clothing	<input type="checkbox"/>	Floral material	<input type="checkbox"/>
Personal items	<input type="checkbox"/>	Misc.	<input type="checkbox"/>
		Other <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Historic Features			
Const feature	<input type="checkbox"/>	Privy/outhouse	<input type="checkbox"/>
Foundation	<input type="checkbox"/>	Well/cistern	<input type="checkbox"/>
Cellar hole/cellar	<input type="checkbox"/>	Trash pit/dump	<input type="checkbox"/>
Hearth/chimney	<input type="checkbox"/>	Sheet midden	<input type="checkbox"/>
Postholes/molds	<input type="checkbox"/>	Planting feature	<input type="checkbox"/>
Paling ditch/fence	<input type="checkbox"/>	Road/walkway	<input type="checkbox"/>
		Depression/mound	<input type="checkbox"/>
		Burial(s)	<input type="checkbox"/>
		Railroad bed	<input type="checkbox"/>
		Earthworks	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
		Mill raceway	<input type="checkbox"/>
		Wheel pit	<input type="checkbox"/>
		Unknown	<input type="checkbox"/>
		Other	<input type="checkbox"/>

All quantities exact or estimated minimal counts

Radiocarbon Data:

Sample 1: +/- years BP Reliability Sample 2: +/- years BP Reliability Sample 3: +/- years BP Reliability

Sample 4: +/- years BP Reliability Sample 5: +/- years BP Reliability Sample 6: +/- years BP Reliability

Sample 7: +/- years BP Reliability Sample 8: +/- years BP Reliability Sample 9: +/- years BP Reliability

Additional radiocarbon results available



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External Samples/Data:

Collection curated at MAC

Additional raw data may be available online

Summary Description:

Fort Nonsense (18AN550) is a 19th century earthen fortification consisting of two arcs of embankments and ditches separated by a gorge or gate on the west side and by a berm on the east-southeast. The site is located on the property of the US Naval Ship Research and Development Center (NSRD), Annapolis Laboratory in Anne Arundel County. Its location is a "whale-back" hilltop above the north bank of the Severn River, near its confluence with the Chesapeake Bay. The site has remained undisturbed by the surrounding Naval research center, which was built on tidal fill at the base of the hill. The hilltop is composed of Sassafras and Monmouth fine sandy loams which support deciduous trees such as apple, oak, sycamore, and wild black cherry, as well as cedar and holly.

The site was first "officially" identified in 1977, when a local hobbyist who painted scenes of early American forts was granted permission to explore the security-restricted naval facility (the individual was a Vietnam War veteran and was able to update his previous security clearance to gain access to the property). The amateur researcher literally stumbled upon the site when he walked through a clump of trees and fell down the embankment of the former fort. No archeological work was conducted at that time, but MHT was made aware of the fort's existence around this time.

The first professional investigation of Ft. Nonsense occurred in 1983. At that time, two properties that are part of the of the NSRD were investigated in order to comply with the mandates of the National Historic Preservation Act: the Carderock Naval Ship Research and Development Laboratory in Montgomery County and the Annapolis Naval Ship Research and Development Laboratory in Anne Arundel County. The work was carried out because records indicated that neither facility had ever been subject to a systematic archeological survey, even though at least one historic fortification (Fort Nonsense) was known to be located at one of the properties. To satisfy the requirements of federal legislation and regulations, the Maryland Historical Trust recommended that the Navy sponsor archeological investigations at both facilities.

During the 1983 survey, the fort was determined to be 64.9 meters in circumference as measured on the crest of the embankment and 99.6 meters as measured on the outer edge of the ditch. It covers approximately .618 acres (.25 hectares) and consists of two arcs: one on the south and southwest and one on the north and northwest. The interior is generally flat except for a depression adjacent to the south wall which measures 8.1 meters north to south and 7.1 meters east to west. The ditch on the northern section is deeper and the embankment steeper than on the southern section. There is a flat gorge or gate 3.7 meters wide between the embankments on the west side and an 11.5 meter berm on the southeast side. The ends of the berm are marked by what appear to be drainage ditches. Three possible embrasures were located on the northern embankment. The irregular shape of the fort does not conform to any prescribed fort or redoubt shape.

During the 1983 investigation, two trenches were excavated at right angles to one another and meeting near the center of the fort. Trench 1 was oriented 231° to include the fort's interior, depression, and southern embankment and ditch. The trench was 18.5 meters long and one meter wide. A 50 cm balk was left in place at the crest of the embankment. Trench 2 was oriented 320° 45', nearly at a right angle to trench 1. It was nineteen meters long and one meter wide and bisected the interior, north embankment and ditch.

Because time did not allow the complete excavation of both trenches, a sample of ten 1 X 1 m units were excavated within the trenches (four in Trench 1 and six in Trench 2) to provide data on the stratigraphy of various parts of the fort. All units were excavated in 10 cm arbitrary levels, and those on the embankment were excavated in stair-step fashion for stability. Once the stratigraphy was defined, the remaining steps were removed in stratigraphic levels in preparation for the final profile drawings. One unit was not excavated completely, but a quadrant was sampled and hand augering was also used to probe beyond the depth at which excavation was impractical. Nearly 100% of the excavated material was screened through hardware cloth.

Shovel tests and magnetometer readings were taken every 5 meters in a grid that extended well beyond the boundaries of the earthworks. Additional STPs were excavated at 10 meter intervals in a grid that extended even beyond the 5 meter grid to the crest of the hill beyond the ditch. No additional features were encountered outside the earthworks. In fact, the only features encountered aside from the earthworks themselves were two natural features (rodent burrows) and a modern pit.

Excavation revealed that the embankment was constructed by inverting the natural stratigraphy from the borrow pit and ditches. Thus, the yellow and pale brown sandy loams of the natural B horizon became mixed with the underlying clay in the embankment fill and were capped by an orange, gravelly, clayey loam from the C horizon. Conclusions drawn from the excavation data strongly suggest that the southern arc was constructed first, in the early 19th Century. The northern arc may have been built at the same time but was apparently reconstructed later in the century by moving the ditch farther out and heightening and steepening the wall.

Very few artifacts were encountered during the course of the 1983 investigations at 18AN550. The assemblage included 5 activity items (a modern plastic toy soldier, a piece of iron wire, and 3 flowerpot fragments), 39 architectural artifacts, 1 clothing item (a possible belt), 43 kitchen-related artifacts, a personal item (an 1824 silver coin), a tobacco pipe fragment (ball clay stem), 1 arms object (a 1900 Colt .38 cartridge), 7 miscellaneous historic artifacts, and 4 prehistoric finds (2 quartz flakes and 2 quartz chunks). The architectural artifacts were 3 pieces of brick (some flecks were also encountered), a piece of mortar, 5 window glass fragments, 25 nails (12 square cut nails, 1 wire, and 12 unidentified), and a cast iron pipe fragment. The kitchen-related artifacts were a hard paste lead-glazed sherd, 25 olive glass bottle shards, 10 other bottle glass shards, 3 pieces of oyster shell, and 4 other shell fragments. And the miscellaneous objects were 2 pieces of metal, a piece of clear glass, a lead strip, a piece of plastic, and 2 fragments of coal ash.

Very little documentation exists to corroborate the conclusions from the archeology. An 1844 map of the Annapolis harbor and an 1846 sketch of nearby Fort Madison, demonstrate the existence of what is referred to as "Old Fort Nonsense" prior to 1844. A report that accompanied the 1846 map mentions that Fort Nonsense was intended to deter attacks from the rear of the more substantial Fort Madison (a star-shaped masonry fort). The history of Fort Madison and several other forts around Annapolis may help to shed more light on the purpose of Ft. Nonsense.

In 1776, the Convention of Maryland appropriated 5,900 £ to fortify Annapolis from British attack during the American Revolution. In the following year, a committee was appointed to study the harbor and it requested and received more funds. Forts are known to have been built at Horn's Point, Windmill Point (Fort Severn where the US Naval Academy now stands), Bieman's Hill, plus breastworks elsewhere. It is not inconceivable that Fort Nonsense may be one of the "other breastworks" constructed in 1777. Hasty construction exclusively from earth by un-trained revolutionaries in the local population might help to explain the unusual shape of the fort.



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In 1808, Congress re-appropriated seacoast defense monies and Forts Madison and Severn and the fort on Horn's Point were begun. Additions, modifications, plans and requests for funds for these forts continued through 1862. By 1811, deficiencies in Fort Madison were evident (specifically its vulnerability to attack from the rear) and its commander had his hands full with disorderly troops and unsupportive townfolk. A review of coastal defenses by the newly created War Department's Board of Engineers in 1816 resulted in a bias toward Fort Severn in terms of attention and funds.

Interest in Fort Madison revived after 1845 when Fort Severn was incorporated into the new US Naval Academy. Repairs were underway by 1853 and continued until 1856. More repairs were made in 1858 and appropriations were still being requested until 1862. The fort was also in operation during the Civil War. Following the Civil War, Fort Madison's garrison was removed by 1867 and in 1873, the US Naval Academy began leasing the surrounding land. The subsequent history of Fort Madison is unknown, but examination of air photos taken during construction of the Naval Air Station during World War II reveals no trace of the fort and it is presumed to have been completely destroyed. Eventually the Fort at Horn's Point was lost to development and Fort Severn was torn down in 1900. Only Fort Nonsense remains intact.

Fort Nonsense certainly existed before 1844, as it is referred to as "old" already by that time. Again, it may have been originally constructed to aid in the defense of Annapolis during the American Revolution. Alternatively, it may have been ancillary to the construction of Fort Madison around 1808, constructed to counteract some of that fort's noted deficiencies. Or it may have simply served as a lookout or a signal station in support of Fort Madison. Excavation reveals a probable period of rebuilding, either post-1845 when attention shifted from Fort Severn to Fort Madison or during the Civil War when Union troops were stationed in Annapolis. The answers to these questions were not fully answered during the 1983 fieldwork.

Based on these findings, Fort Nonsense (18AN550) is clearly significant in its relation to important events (i.e. the Revolutionary War, the War of 1812, and the Civil War), in its distinctive characteristics (its unusual shape and entirely earthen redoubts), and its potential for yielding information since it is the last vestige of Annapolis harbor fortifications. The Fort is in excellent condition, well protected from erosion and vandalism. Expanded excavations in and around the fort may be able to reveal much that is relevant to Maryland and American history.

External Reference Codes (Library ID Numbers):

00000524, Site Files