



Fort Lesley J. McNair

By John Michael. Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2015. ISBN 978-1-4671-2323-5. Photographs. Maps. Pp.127. \$21.99.

BOOK REVIEWS

The old maxim that “a picture is worth a thousand words” has been attributed to everyone from Napoleon and Confucius to Turgenev. Regardless of whomever first coined the term, truer words were never spoken when describing John Michael’s refreshing little book on the fascinating history Fort Lesley J. McNair, an Army post along the Washington, DC, waterfront. Mr. Michael earlier wrote a comparable companion volume on Northern Virginia’s Fort Myer, also part of Arcadia Publishing’s “Images of America” series.

A New Jersey native who has been a Washington-area “local” since 1999, Michael has involved himself both as a historian and volunteer in the Army culture of the region. His discerning and intuitive photographs, including the solemn business of Arlington National Cemetery, are widely recognized as insightful and have been featured in the first and second regimental “Old Guard” calendars (2009 and 2010), at the National Museum of the Marine Corps, and other military venues. In addition to using his own photos for his book on Fort McNair, Michael’s critical but precise photographer’s eye has allowed him to select complimentary photos from other sources, particularly for those earlier elements of Fort McNair’s history now lost, from the collections of the Library of Congress, National Archives, and similar resources. While Michael’s prose is an integral element to the book, unlike many such histories, the written words

are modestly secondary to and serve as the literary glue between the black and white photographs featured in the book. The aggregate volume provides a clear-cut albeit relatively concise account of Fort McNair’s history.

Fort Lesley J. McNair, one of the Army’s oldest installations, is located on a peninsula jutting out between the Potomac and Anacostia Rivers and is situated on a site of a military installation that dates back to 1791. First called Turkey Buzzard Point, then mercifully renamed Greenleaf Point, the site was a focus for French architect Pierre Charles L’Enfant, the man responsible for designing the layout of Washington, DC. The Army post went by several names over the years, ranging from Military Reservation # 05, Washington Arsenal, and Washington Barracks. The current designation honors General Lesley J. McNair, who had been stationed here and was killed on 25 July 1944 in France.

At various times the area comprising the current fort has housed hospitals, schools, sports venues and teams, and various military organizations. Following the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln in April 1865, the Army incarcerated and tried the conspirators at the post; four were later hanged on site. It is rumored that one of those, Mary Surratt, still haunts the post. Others conjecture that the purported specter may be the ghost of Major Walter Reed who observed mosquitoes in the stagnant waters near the post and later helped

prove that the insects transmitted yellow fever. Reed died of peritonitis in the U.S. Army hospital at the then-Washington Barracks in 1902 while in surgery for appendicitis.

Fort McNair now houses the Headquarters of the Military District of Washington, the National Defense University, Inter-American Defense College, and the U.S. Army Center of Military History. It is also the site of military housing for service personnel, including flag and general officers and their families.

A longstanding bastion protecting the nation’s capital, Fort Lesley J. McNair is one of the more interesting of military sites in the DC area. John Michael’s smart tome reflects that. It is the perfect starting place for the serious historian, the tourist, the student, or the merely curious, and provides an enthusiastic and sound basis for readers to investigate any number of further avenues of thoughtful pursuit.

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