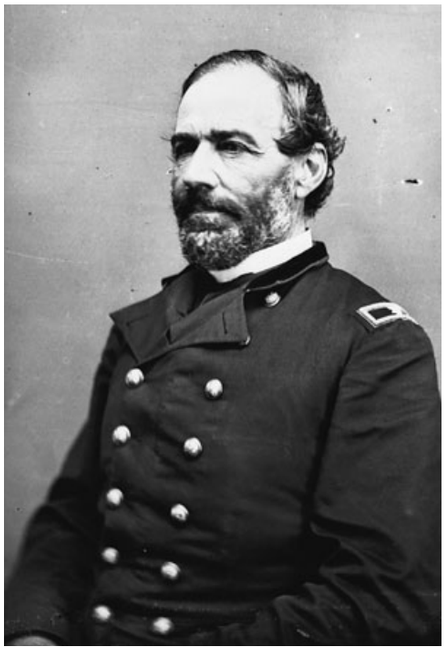
Principal Fortifications of the United States

(1870–1875)



Brevet Brigadier General Seth Eastman.
(Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division)

During the late 18th century and through much of the 19th century, army forts were constructed throughout the United States to defend the growing nation from a variety of threats, both perceived and real. Seventeen of these sites are depicted in a collection painted especially for the U.S. Capitol by Seth Eastman. Born in 1808 in Brunswick, Maine, Eastman found expression for his artistic skills in a military career. After graduating from the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, where officers-in-training were taught basic drawing and drafting techniques, Eastman was posted to forts in Wisconsin and Minnesota before returning to West Point as assistant teacher of drawing. Eastman also established himself as an accomplished landscape painter, and between 1836 and 1840, 17 of his oils were exhibited at the National Academy of Design in New York City. His election as an honorary member of the academy in 1838 further enhanced his status as an artist.

Transferred to posts in Florida, Minnesota, and Texas in the 1840s, Eastman became interested in the Native Americans of these regions and made numerous sketches of the people and their customs. This experience prepared him for his next five years in Washington, D.C., where he was assigned to the commissioner of Indian Affairs and illustrated Henry Rowe Schoolcraft's important six-volume *Historical and Statistical Information Respecting the History, Condition, and Prospects of the Indian Tribes of the United States*. During this time Eastman also assisted Captain Montgomery C. Meigs, superintendent of the Capitol extension, in securing the services of several Native Americans to model for the sculptors working on the 1850s addition to the building.

In 1867 Eastman returned to the Capitol, this time to paint a series of nine scenes of Native American life for the House Committee on Indian Affairs. Eastman's talent and his special knowledge of the subject certainly qualified him for the commission, which was obtained for him by House Ways and Means Committee Chairman Robert C. Schenck of Ohio. Schenck, a former Civil War officer who, like Eastman, was retired for disability during the war, believed American—not European—artists should receive the Capitol commissions. In introducing a resolution urging the hiring of Eastman for the project, Schenck remarked:

> We have been paying for decorations, some displaying good taste and others of tawdry character, a great deal of money to Italian artists and others, while we have American talent much more competent for the work. Among others . . . is General Eastman,

who . . . is more of an artist in all that relates to the Indians, except possibly Catlin and Stanley, than any we have had in this country. . . . If assigned to this duty General Eastman will draw his full pay as lieutenant colonel, instead of as on the retired list, making a difference of about $1,200 or $1,500 a year. For at the most $1,500 a year we will secure service for which we have been paying tens of thousands of dollars to foreign artists, and we will get better work done.[1]

Schenck's resolution was approved by the House but tabled by the Senate. Nevertheless, the retired Eastman was placed—by special order of the War Department—on "active duty" so that he could be compensated for creating works of art for the Capitol. He finished the nine paintings in 1869.

In 1870 House Military Affairs Committee Chairman John A. Logan of Illinois proposed that Eastman produce 17 canvases depicting army forts. It is indicative of the post-Civil War sentiment in America that Logan specified that Eastman was not to paint battle scenes; indeed, the mood of these forts set in landscapes is serene, even nostalgic to some degree. Never a well man, Eastman was aged and ailing by the time he received the commission, and it is not known if he visited the forts. He had been stationed at several of them during his military career, and as a trained topographical draftsman he probably had plans, elevations, and even photographs of the forts at his disposal. Eastman completed the series between 1870 and 1875.

Charles E. Fairman, longtime curator of the Capitol, was slightly dismissive of Eastman's fort paintings. He thought they were "probably more valuable as examples of historical accuracy . . . than for purely decorative purposes."[2] He explained that it was important that knowledge concerning government fortifications should be easily accessible and these pictures "contain desired information and also relieve acceptably what might otherwise be blank spaces upon an uninteresting wall."[3] Yet without touting Eastman's paintings as masterpieces, it is still possible to value them as considerably more than repositories of "desired information."

For many years, the fort paintings hung in the House Military Affairs Committee Room, first in the Capitol and later in the Cannon House Office Building. During the late 1930s, they were returned to the Capitol for public display. Of the 17 paintings, eight are located in the Senate, while the others are on display on the House side of the Capitol. Eastman was working on the West Point painting when he died in 1875.

Note to the reader: Although the entire series of Seth Eastman's 17 fort paintings is reproduced on the following pages, written commentaries are confined to the eight paintings in the Senate wing.

Fort Defiance, Arizona

Of Seth Eastman's fort series, this is the only painting of an army post in the Southwest. Located at Canyon Bonito about seven miles north of Window Rock, Arizona, Fort Defiance was established in 1851 to create a military presence in Navajo Country. It was built on valuable grazing land that the federal government then prohibited the Navajo from using. As a result, the appropriately named fort experienced intense fighting, culminating in an unsuccessful 1860 attack by the Navajo. The next year, at the onset of the Civil War, the army abandoned Fort Defiance. Continued Navajo raids in the area led the army to send Kit Carson to impose order. His "solution" was brutal: thousands of starving Navajo were interned in Fort Sumner, New Mexico, and much of their livestock was destroyed. The Navajo Treaty of 1868 allowed those interned to return to a portion of their land, and Fort Defiance was reestablished as an Indian agency that year. It was during the development of the fort into an agency that Eastman depicted the site in his painting, but the evidence of the picture suggests that he never visited the post.

At the base of a butte, a small, rudimentary block of one-story log and sod buildings stands on a foreground plain. A dark gorge divides the butte, and a road emerges from it. In contrast to the lush, grassy grazing land that typified Fort Defiance, in the painting everything is barren and inhospitable. The land is the color of sandalwood, and there is little contrast in the sky. It is tempting to enumerate the buildings because they are the focus of the scene. Low barracks fill most of the small space, but one may discern kitchens, latrines, open tents, distant cattle, wagons, and about 30 human figures, including a group of soldiers drilling in the yard.

The scene is prosaic and matter-of-fact, and this is probably why it seems to embody the true sense of an outpost. Surprisingly, the feeling is similar to that captured by some 20th-century films—the bleak setting of the Western genre, but without the Native American and army conflict. The decision to omit all battles from Eastman's series of fort paintings explains this departure from the bitter reality of life at Fort Defiance.

Fort Defiance, Arizona

Seth Eastman (1808–1875)

Oil on canvas, 1873
21⅝ x 31½ inches (54.9 x 80 cm)
Signed and dated (lower left center): S. E. / 187[3]
Commissioned by special order of the U.S. War Department, 1867
Presented to the House Committee on Military Affairs, 1875
Cat. no. 33.00011

Fort Delaware, Delaware

The low block of this large fort is poised between sky and water, its tranquil reflection contributing to the pleasantly calm effect of Seth Eastman's depiction. The sky is filled with gently animated clouds, and a sure handling of the space, from the darker, skillfully detailed foreground to the light-filled distance, marks the whole painting.

Fort Delaware was built on Pea Patch Island in the Delaware River, below Wilmington and New Castle, Delaware. The first fortification on the island was constructed soon after the War of 1812 to protect Philadelphia and its harbor as well as the dynamite and munitions plants near Wilmington. It was demolished in 1833. The present structure was erected between 1848 and 1859, becoming the largest fort in the country. During the Civil War, beginning in 1862, the island became a prison for captured Confederates and local Southern sympathizers. They were housed not in the fort proper but in wooden barracks that soon covered much of the island. Most of the Confederates captured at Gettysburg were imprisoned there. By August 1863, there were 12,500 prisoners on the island; by war's end, it had held some 40,000 men. The conditions were predictably notorious, and about 2,900 prisoners died at Fort Delaware. Although the benign appearance of the postwar fort in Eastman's painting might have seemed ironic to late 19th-century viewers, it is also true that Delaware's guns never fired a shot during its entire history.

Fort Delaware, Delaware

Seth Eastman (1808–1875)

Oil on canvas, 1870–1875
24⅜ x 35⅜ inches (61.9 x 89.9 cm)
Signed (lower left): S. E.
Commissioned by special order of the U.S. War Department, 1867
Presented to the House Committee on Military Affairs, 1875
Cat. no. 33.00012

Fort Knox, Maine

Maine was repeatedly involved in northeast border disputes with British Canada, and the area between Castine and the rich lumber city of Bangor was invaded and occupied by the British during the American Revolution and the War of 1812. Despite the Webster-Ashburton Treaty of 1842, which adjusted the boundary to avert the possibility of war, Fort Knox was established in 1844 to protect the Penobscot River valley against a possible future British naval incursion. Named for Major General Henry Knox, America's first secretary of war and a native of Maine, the fort garrisoned troops from 1863 to 1866, and again in 1898, but never saw military action.

As is customary with Seth Eastman, a quiet, subtle skill is at work here. He adjusts his tonal palette to convincingly construct both the situation of the fort and the other objects within the space. The fort—a complex geometric structure—is in good repair, yet no human is visible in or on the fort. There is a sense of abandonment reflective of the fort's history. The sailboat and rowboat, whose occupants are observers of this little-used remnant of the nation's military past, heighten the mood. Eastman was aware that the fort had little history—no real story to tell—and he cleanly and matter-of-factly embeds the granite structure in the Maine landscape.

Fort Knox, Maine

Seth Eastman (1808–1875)

Oil on canvas, 1870–1875
24¼ x 35½ inches (61.6 x 90.2 cm)
Unsigned
Commissioned by special order of the U.S. War Department, 1867
Presented to the House Committee on Military Affairs, 1875
Cat. no. 33.00013

Fort Mackinac, Michigan

Fort Mackinac is located on Mackinac Island, Michigan, in the narrow waterway between Lakes Huron and Michigan, very near the present border with Canada. During more than a century as an active military post, the fort changed ownership several times and participated directly in only one conflict, the War of 1812. British soldiers built this outpost in 1781, on a high limestone bluff overlooking the Straits of Mackinac. The isolated post provided much needed protection and support for the Great Lakes fur trade. In 1783, following the American victory in the Revolutionary War, the fort became United States property. However, the British remained for another 13 years in an attempt to control fur trade in the upper Great Lakes. In 1796 they evacuated the fort in accordance with the terms of Jay's Treaty, and the American army occupied and repaired the aging outpost. When the United States declared war on Great Britain in June 1812, the British attacked and recaptured the fort, holding it until the Treaty of Ghent ended the war and returned the post to American possession. The fort sat idle during the Civil War and thereafter was irregularly garrisoned by troops until 1895, when it was finally closed.

The painting successfully conveys a place and climate quite different from the other locations in the fort series. Like a walled town, the elevated structure consists of separate buildings within the walls. At the right, outside the fort, is a very large house. At the foot of the steep hill are three houses, then a stone wall with a gate, and finally the shore with a rudimentary jetty. A canoe approaches the jetty. A large fishing boat is on the shore, partly covered, with a fisherman in attendance. The looming cloud in the darkening sky warns of an approaching storm, whose advance winds have stirred the water of this safe harbor into small whitecaps, occasioning this small flurry of activity. In the distance at the left, beyond the point, the viewer glimpses a steamship and a sail on Lake Michigan. For the weather-bearing clouds, Seth Eastman has employed blended swirls of blue-black paint in an improvisatory pattern. It is clear from the painting that the island is populated, if sparsely, but there is no evidence of the very slight military presence that was still there in 1872.

Fort Mackinac, Michigan

Seth Eastman (1808–1875)

Oil on canvas, 1872
24¾ x 35½ inches (62.9 x 90.2 cm)
Signed and dated (lower right corner): S. E. / 1872
Commissioned by special order of the U.S. War Department, 1867
Presented to the House Committee on Military Affairs, 1875
Cat. no. 33.00014

Fort Scammel and Fort Gorges, Maine

Following the War of 1812, the Army Corps of Engineers proposed that a fort be built on Hog Island Ledge, in Casco Bay at the entrance to the harbor at Portland, Maine. Named for the colonial proprietor of Maine, Sir Ferdinando Gorges, it was constructed to support existing forts, including Fort Scammel built on nearby House Island in 1808. Congress, however, did not fund construction of Fort Gorges until 1857. The walls of the fort were begun the next year, and when the Civil War broke out in 1861, work quickly advanced. It was completed in 1865 as the war ended, a granite reminder of what might have been. A modernization plan was begun in 1869, but funding was cut off in 1876, with the third level of the fort still unfinished. Seth Eastman painted his canvas during this final phase.

Eastman gave Fort Scammel and Fort Gorges equal emphasis in his sweeping view. On the distant waters of the bay, the viewer glimpses the activity of sailboats and a steamboat, as well as construction cranes behind both forts. This painting is unusually complex among the works in the series, in both design elements and narrative implications. For example, the large pier at the lower right, its pilings, and the rock and piling at the center are strongly drawn and tightly composed. The pier is animated by 11 figures, standing or seated, who have gathered there. Eastman conveys the specifics of place with attention to the dress and posture of the figures and the structure and age of the pier. The lounging atmosphere, the casual note of the ladder leaning against the small shed at the right, and the motionless boat with inactive occupants at the left all suggest a backwater where time stands still. Again, Eastman seems to compare the foreground idleness with the idleness of the forts and with dreams of battles never fought. The mood is greatly enhanced by the large sky, with a variety of cloud formations tranquilly painted in pale gray tints.

Fort Scammel and Fort Gorges, Maine

Seth Eastman (1808–1875)

Oil on canvas, 1872
24⅝ x 35⅝ inches (62.5 x 90.5 cm)
Signed and dated (lower right corner): S. E. / 1872
Commissioned by special order of the U.S. War Department, 1867
Presented to the House Committee on Military Affairs, 1875
Cat. no. 33.00015

Fort Taylor, Florida

The federal government broke ground on Fort Zachary Taylor in 1845, the same year that Florida became a state. Progress was extremely slow because of the remote location at Key West harbor and the tropical climate. The former made obtaining building materials difficult, and the latter brought yellow fever and hurricanes. Although its completion was thus delayed until 1866, the fort nonetheless played a significant part during the Civil War by intercepting blockade-running ships. It may have been this role, as well as Fort Taylor's physical setting, that inspired Eastman's unusually expressive painting.

This is one of the more striking paintings in the series because of the ambitious and dramatic atmosphere. The fort is solid and inert, its flag positioned in the exact center of the image. The sky is a mauve-gray concoction with darker cloud trails at the top. The water is windblown and dynamic, swirling around the foreground buoys and composed in a counterpoint of movement with the sky. The huge fort is suspended between sky and water, slightly left of center, with carefully drawn sailing vessels balancing the picture to the right. Only a small portion of land is visible on the left.

Fort Taylor, Florida

Seth Eastman (1808–1875)

Oil on canvas, 1870–1875
21⅝ x 31½ inches (54.9 x 80 cm)
Unsigned
Commissioned by special order of the U.S. War Department, 1867
Presented to the House Committee on Military Affairs, 1875
Cat. no. 33.00016

Fort Trumbull, Connecticut

In 1775 Governor Jonathan Trumbull recommended the building of a fortification at the port of New London to protect the seat of the government of Connecticut. Built on a rocky point of land near the mouth of the Thames River on Long Island Sound, the fort was completed in 1777 and named for Governor Trumbull, who served from 1769 to 1784. In 1781 during the Revolutionary War, the fort was attacked and captured by British forces under the command of Benedict Arnold. In the early 19th century, the fort was redesigned and rebuilt to meet changing military needs. The present fortification was built between 1839 and 1852 as a five-sided, four-bastion coastal defense fort. During the Civil War, Fort Trumbull served as an organizational center for Union troops and headquarters for the 14th Infantry Regiment. Here, troops were recruited and trained before being sent to war. Today, the fort serves as a public park and tourist attraction.

Seth Eastman imagines a windless day on the river below the fort as the setting for a quiet, pleasant scene. The everyday aspects of this painting—the boaters and people on the shore—are, to our eyes, of greater interest than the fort. Many of the carefully detailed figures (10 in all) seem to be regarding the fort, and the viewer's attention is held in this foreground area by the keenly observed, finely painted rocks and water grasses. The apparently abandoned fort seems clearly a thing of the past, now merely part of the pastoral scenery. The lack of military activity is emphasized by a small figure leaning casually against the wall of the fort at the right.

Fort Trumbull, Connecticut

Seth Eastman (1808–1875)

Oil on canvas, 1870–1875
24⅜ x 35¼ inches (61.9 x 89.5 cm)
Unsigned
Commissioned by special order of the U.S. War Department, 1867
Presented to the House Committee on Military Affairs, 1875
Cat. no. 33.00017

West Point, New York

Neither signed nor dated by the artist, this is the painting Seth Eastman was completing when he died in 1875. The painting is unique in the series because the fort is not seen except at its perimeter gun placement. Instead, the viewer stands just above this small proscenium and looks out at a scene of the Hudson River. The setting was familiar to 19th-century Americans from the large number of paintings and prints of it already existing. West Point was not an active fort at this time. In 1802, after its crucial Revolutionary War role in preventing a British advance down the river to New York City, West Point became a military academy under the patronage of President Thomas Jefferson.

Even before the Civil War, West Point had become a tourist destination because of its fame, its proximity to New York City, and its picturesque location. In the painting, a woman, escorted by a cadet, tours the grounds. This work, alone among the fort paintings, shows some military activity—the cadets are learning to prepare a cannon for firing. An officer-instructor stands second from the left; two boys ram the charge home in the large cannon's barrel. Two smaller pieces of ordnance are also shown. But it is the Hudson River, its high banks framing the water where pleasure boats cruise, that draws the eyes away from the busy foreground and into the serene distance.

West Point, New York

Seth Eastman (1808–1875)

Oil on canvas, 1875
24¼ x 35⅛ inches (61.6 x 89.2 cm)
Unsigned
Commissioned by special order of the U.S. War Department, 1867
Presented to the House Committee on Military Affairs, 1875
Cat. no. 33.00018

Fort Jefferson, Florida **by Seth Eastman, 1875.**
(House Fine Arts Board. Photo courtesy Architect of the Capitol)

Fort Lafayette, New York **by Seth Eastman, 1870–1875.**
(House Fine Arts Board. Photo courtesy Architect of the Capitol)

Fort Mifflin, Pennsylvania **by Seth Eastman, 1873.**
(House Fine Arts Board. Photo courtesy Architect of the Capitol)

Fort Rice, North Dakota **by Seth Eastman, 1873.**
(House Fine Arts Board. Photo courtesy Architect of the Capitol)

***Fort Snelling, Minnesota* by Seth Eastman, 1870–1875.**
(House Fine Arts Board. Photo courtesy Architect of the Capitol)

***Fort Sumter, South Carolina (before the war)* by Seth Eastman, 1871.**
(House Fine Arts Board. Photo courtesy Architect of the Capitol)

***Fort Sumter, South Carolina (after the bombardment)* by Seth Eastman, 1870–1875.**
(House Fine Arts Board. Photo courtesy Architect of the Capitol)

***Fort Sumter, South Carolina (after the war)* by Seth Eastman, 1870.**
(House Fine Arts Board. Photo courtesy Architect of the Capitol)

***Fort Tompkins and Fort Wadsworth, New York* by Seth Eastman, 1870–1875.**
(House Fine Arts Board. Photo courtesy Architect of the Capitol)