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Pre-History

Governors Island rests on the same solid bedrock that supports the Manhattan skyscrapers, but its historical appearance, and thus its human use, was determined more directly by the glaciers. About 80,000 years ago the continental ice sheet known as the Wisconsin began to expand from its sources in the polar region. Eventually an equilibrium was reached where the forward thrust of the ice was matched by the melting of its leading edge. At this point the glacier dropped the accumulation of stone and gravel it had been carrying, leaving a terminal moraine. This ragged line runs across New Jersey, exiting the state at Perth Amboy, crosses Staten Island and Brooklyn, and continues to the eastern tip of Long Island and beyond.

The glacier began to retreat from the New York area around 20,000 years ago, leaving conditions far different than we see today. So much water was tied up in the ice sheet that ocean levels were lower, exposing hundreds of miles of continental shelf. The terminal moraine and the glacier itself disrupted the previous drainage system, forming long, cold lakes in the valleys. Over several thousand years the Hudson River broke through to reestablish its outlet, and rising sea levels filled New York harbor and formed estuaries such as the East and Harlem Rivers. At first the departing glacier left behind a barren, frigid landscape, but conditions moderated rapidly. Human beings arrived in time to witness some of these changes and may have been present to see Governors Island become permanently separated from other land. When European explorers ventured into the bay in the late 16th and early 17th Centuries, they found bands of native Lenapes making regular use of the rich island, which they called Pagganack¹, a name that refers to the abundant nut trees. Probably the natives rowed out to the island and set up seasonal encampments as part of their yearly cycle of harvesting resources.

Nooten Eylandt

During the “Age of Discovery” several European explorers sailed into New York harbor, but events in Europe decided that it would be the Dutch who first settled there. Energized by their long struggle for independence from Spanish oppression, the inhabitants of this isolated, low corner of Europe built a far-ranging maritime and commercial empire. Using many of the techniques of modern capitalism and taking advantage of greater individual freedom than could be found elsewhere in the continent,

¹ I have seen this given as both Pagganck and Pagganack. Transcribing Indian names into English is an uncertain business at best, but Pagganack seems to resemble more closely other Indian-derived names in the region. Wright & Binzen, “Archeological Overview and Assessment” summarize the various cultural stages of prehistoric occupation of the region. Since there appears to be nothing distinctive about Governors Island, and moreover, the island’s configuration was much different during most of this time (not even being an island for much of it) it did not seem productive to repeat this information here.

the Dutch Republic became wealthy. It was during this expansive “golden age” in the early 17th Century that the Nieu Nederlandt colony was established along the river Henry Hudson had explored.

Modeled on the highly successful Dutch East India Company, a West India Company was formed in 1621 and three years later sent a shipload of 30 families to the new colony in North America. A majority of them sailed upriver to establish a trading post near present Albany, but another party spent the Winter of 1624 on Governors Island, which they named Nooten Eylandt, their translation of Pagganack. In the following year they moved across to Manhattan with their cattle and began building a fort to defend the settlement they fondly named Nieu Amsterdam.² The Dutch set up a saw mill on Nooten Eylandt, which produced timber for the first cabins on Manhattan.³ In this way Governors Island assisted the birth of New York. Living in a rich area and well provisioned by the home company, the inhabitants of New Amsterdam did not undergo a “starving time” like the settlers of Plymouth or Jamestown.

In 1633 Wouter van Twiller, only 27 years old, arrived as governor of the colony. With a circumference approximating his height and a fiery temper, the new governor provided delightful material for Washington Irving’s later Knickerbocker tales. The early Dutch governors had no compunctions about enriching themselves while conducting company business, and in 1637 the redoubtable van Twiller allegedly “purchased” Nooten Eylandt from the local Lenapes for trinkets, much as Peter Minuit had bought Manhattan in 1626.⁴ (No record of this transaction survives, and the Indians’ understanding of it was not noted.) Interestingly, a somewhat similar situation occurred in Boston, where a harbor island was granted to Governor John Winthrop in 1632 and also became known as Governors Island. Unlike the New York example, Winthrop actually built a house on his island, and his family retained ownership into the 19th Century.

For his personal and other abuses, van Twiller was recalled in 1638 and his private land acquisitions were annulled. According to tradition, he may have built a house and started plantations on Nooten Eyland, but no trace of them remains. His equally corrupt successor Willem Kieft revived the saw mill on the island, but it apparently ceased operating by 1648, indicating that the luxuriant forest cover was mostly gone. Under the irascible, authoritarian Petrus (Pieter) Stuyvesant, the New Netherlands colony prospered, though pushed back by the expanding English from its claims on the

² Michael Kammen, *Colonial New York* (Oxford Univ. Press, 1996; orig. 1975), 29-30.

³ A map supposedly intended to depict conditions around 1639 shows a sawmill on the northwest corner of the island, facing the North River (“Manatus Gelegen op de Noot [Noort] Rivier in Nieu Neerlandt [Nederlandt]” drawn c.1665-70, in Augustyn and Cohen, *Manhattan in Maps* (Rizzoli, 1997), 28-9.

⁴ This tradition has been repeatedly recounted; for example, Federal Writers’ Project, *The WPA Guide to New York City* (1939; reprint New Press, 1992, p.415, which even lists some of the trinkets: “one or two axheads, a few nails, and other trifles.” Prominent American historian John Fiske accepted the story, though without giving the amount paid: “Large estates were bought by Van Twiller and his friends, in the expectation of a rise of values. Among these was the little island in the bay, which the Indians called Pagganck, and the Dutch Nut Island, but which ever since Van Twiller’s purchase has been known as Governors Island. . . . The Indian occupants of these lands were paid for them after the usual fashion. . . .” (*The Dutch and Quaker Colonies in America* [Houghton, Mifflin, 1899, vol. I, 188]). Fiske does not cite an original source, and confirming this account would require a major search of colonial records.

Connecticut River. English envy of the Dutch seaborne empire and dislike of the Dutch wedge between the colonies in New England and Virginia led to a series of wars between the two naval powers. In 1664, with only Stuyvesant willing to take up arms, a British fleet seized Manhattan. The invaders renamed both the city and the colony New York, after the king's brother James, Duke of York.

At the time of the British takeover, New Amsterdam was a town of about 1500 residents, clustered south of the defensive barrier along today's Wall Street. Dutch settlements (many of whose inhabitants were not ethnically Dutch) were scattered over Long Island, northern New Jersey and up the Hudson Valley, but Nooten Eylandt was not permanently occupied. During another war in 1673 a Dutch expedition recaptured the territory and was warmly welcomed by the Dutch inhabitants. To their bitter disappointment, the colony was exchanged for Surinam in South America by treaty, ending hopes of reviving Nieu Nederlandt.

New York Colony

Despite its strategic location, Nutten Island remained generally a quiet backwater during more than a century under the British flag. In 1698, under a new governor, Lord Bellomont, the colonial Assembly set aside the island as "part of the Denizen of His Majesty's Governors," probably to prevent subsequent governors from giving it away to private interests.⁵ The name Governors Island thus came into use, but the former names of Nutten or Nut Island persisted. As a preserve of the royally appointed governors, the island was further insulated from the occasional political turmoil and rapid growth of the nearby city. At times the parklike island was stocked with pheasants, and it seemed that its future course would come under the theme of recreation, rather than defense.

Bellomont's successor Edward Hyde, Viscount Cornbury, a relative of Queen Anne, levied a tax in 1702 to fortify Governors Island. This tax was assessed on an odd assortment of social groups, such as periwig wearers and bachelors. Cornbury then spent the money he had raised to build a splendid house for his personal use on Governors Island. Not surprisingly, an unproven and unlikely tradition grew up that at least part of this house is incorporated in the present "Governor's House" (Building 2).⁶ A combination of Cornbury's unsavory financial manipulations, ineffective rule, political disputes and eccentricities caused him to be replaced in 1708.⁷

One notable interruption in the island's placid existence came shortly after Cornbury's departure, with the arrival of several thousand "Palatine" refugees. These were German-speaking Protestants who had been driven out of the Rhineland and

⁵ This is the explanation of the mechanism by which the island was transferred out of private ownership given in *Three Centuries* (7), but without providing original documentation. It would require a major search of colonial records to confirm the accuracy of this account.

⁶ Given the propensity of old military posts to accumulate legends, it is predictable that this story arose, but it seems exceedingly unlikely that it has any veracity. There is no reason to challenge the HABS finding that the building was erected around 1812. Its varied subsequent uses testify to its adaptability.

⁷ Cornbury was controversial in his time and has remained so among historians, in part because of his reputed transvestitism; but these issues seem peripheral to this essay (mere window-dressing).

impoverished by French King Louis XIV's territorial expansion. Sympathetic to their plight and perhaps hoping they would be useful to the crown by producing tar and other "naval stores" from pitch pine, Queen Anne arranged to bring some of them to New York. When they arrived in the harbor many were sick with typhus and other communicable diseases and were quarantined on Governors Island. At least 250 Palatines died and presumably were buried somewhere on the island. Subsequently, the naval stores project turned out to be a fiasco, and the hapless Palatines were left to their own devices. Many settled in the Mohawk Valley, where they became a significant part of the population and were later caught up in fierce frontier fighting during the War for American Independence.

Military activity finally came to Governors Island in 1755, during the French and Indian War (Seven Years War in Europe), the last of four imperial conflicts between France and Britain, all of which had a prominent North American component. Several British regiments were quartered and trained on the island, among them a regiment composed of Americans. No record seems to survive as to whether these troops were housed in anything more permanent than tents.

In the War for Independence

The treaty that ended the French and Indian War in 1763 removed the danger of French attack on the British colonies but left the problem of how to administer Britain's greatly expanded empire. A move to defray the cost of defending the colonies by imposing a stamp tax in 1765 provoked violent resistance in New York, as elsewhere. For the next ten years periodic discord flared as King George III tried to maintain and enlarge his prerogatives in North America. New York City, with a population approaching 25,000, concentrated below Chambers Street, was already fractured by family rivalries, religion, and economic interests; and the arguments over royal authority added to the volatile mix. Historians have examined this period exhaustively, and the overall impression they convey is a profoundly divided city. Perhaps because the two sides were relatively equal and conspicuous, each tended to view the city as a stronghold of its foes.

Long-simmering tension between the colonists and the mother country exploded into open warfare at Lexington and Concord in April 1775, followed two months later by the bloody clash at Bunker Hill. George Washington, commander of the rebel forces, besieged the British in Boston over the Winter of 1775-76 and forced them to evacuate the city in March 1776. For a time there were no British military forces in the colonies, and it was during this interval, while the British were regrouping in Halifax, Nova Scotia, that the Continental Congress pushed toward independence.

Guessing that, once they were reinforced, the British would move against New York, Washington dispatched General Charles Lee, erratic but highly regarded because he had been a British officer, to direct the defense of the city. Lee arrived in February 1776 but remained only about a month before he was called away to command at Charleston, South Carolina. He apparently felt that New York was not really defensible, and his strategy seemed to be to draw the British invaders into Manhattan and make them

pay a steep price in lives by forcing them to attack a succession of defensive barriers. Under this plan, continued by Lee's successor, no effort was made to fortify Governors Island.

This neglect ended dramatically on April 8, when 1000 men landed on the island and worked all night to build defensive works.⁸ The man responsible for this change was General Israel Putnam, a legendary hero of the French and Indian War, who won further fame for the earthworks his troops hastily threw up at Bunker Hill. Indeed, one regiment that garrisoned Governors Island for a time was William Prescott's, which had earned renown at that battle. Under Putnam's direction, the Americans also placed a battery on Red Hook, a nearby projection of Brooklyn that was sometimes an island during high water. Eventually the Americans installed more than 30 guns on Governors Island, and Washington declared "Governor's Island is more strong and better guarded than any other post in the Army."⁹ That may well have been true, since none of the American defenses were as strong as they needed to be.

On July 2, 1776, two days before the Declaration of Independence was read in New York City¹⁰, the largest military force ever seen in North America and the largest force the British had ever sent abroad appeared in New York harbor. Commanded by the Howe brothers, Admiral Richard and General William, the British landed unopposed on Staten Island. Shortly afterward, they sent two warships up the Hudson to test American defenses. Even though these ships escaped without severe damage, the vigorous American firing from Governors Island and elsewhere may have reinforced the characteristic caution of the Howes.

In August the British army moved across to Long Island and, battling over hilly terrain left by the terminal moraine, quickly outmaneuvered and overwhelmed the American defenders. Washington and that portion of his army made an almost miraculous escape from Brooklyn (then the name of only a small community on Long Island) on the night of August 29-30. British respect for the guns on Governors Island may have been one of the factors that prevented them from interfering with the American evacuation. This idea is reinforced by the fact that when the British fleet opened a terrific bombardment of the island on August 30, it stood off at such a distance that little damage was done. An embittered loyalist later observed that the mighty display "might as well have been directed at the moon."¹¹ No one would have guessed it at the time, but that was the only occasion in its long military history that Governors Island came under fire.

⁸ Two ranges of earthworks are depicted on William Faden's campaign map, likely drawn in 1777 but depicting the period Aug. 22 to Sep. 16, 1776 (in Augustyn and Cohen, *Manhattan in Maps*, 81). Curiously, Governors Island seems to be the only place where Faden used the symbol for earthworks; none are shown on other points known to be fortified, such as Red Hook, Brooklyn Heights, and Paulus Hook.

⁹ Quoted in *Three Centuries under Three Flags*, 13.

¹⁰ The correct date for reading the Declaration to Washington's army is July 9. See, among others, Schechter, *The Battle for New York*, 102-103.

¹¹ Thomas Jones, *History of New York during the Revolutionary War* (Arno Press, 1968; reprint of N.Y. Historical Soc., 1879), 117.

Later on August 30, the American garrison on Governors Island withdrew to Manhattan, joining the rest of a dwindling and somewhat demoralized army. After they occupied Governors Island, the British turned some of its guns against the Americans on Manhattan. In subsequent fighting the British drove Washington's army beyond the limits of New York City but seemingly held back from destroying it. In addition to the natural caution and indolence of General Howe, his brother had been authorized to negotiate peace with the rebels, and that may have been their overriding goal.

For the duration of the war Governors Island, with the rest of New York City, remained under British control. A short distance away, on Wallabout Bay, the later site of Brooklyn Navy Yard, as many as 10,000 Americans, a number far exceeding total American battle deaths in the war, may have died horribly on rotting British prison ships. Lacking a fleet, the United States by itself could do little to threaten the British position, but the situation changed dramatically in 1778 when France, impressed by the stunning American victory at Saratoga and the Continental Army's resiliency in the battles around Philadelphia, signed an alliance with the new nation. On several occasions powerful French fleets stood just outside the dangerous bar between Sandy Hook and Coney Island, forcing the British and their loyalist supporters in New York to dig in. They reported "repairing the ruined Fortifications & Batterys, erected by the Rebels" on Governors Island and added buildings such as a hospital.¹² Both the Americans and the British probably fortified the high part of the island, at or near present Fort Jay.¹³

Throughout the war Washington nurtured hopes of retaking New York and avenging the humiliating defeats of 1776, but even with French help he never amassed the overwhelming superiority he would need. It was only after the peace treaty of 1783 that the Americans quietly returned to New York City, marching in by arrangement just hours after the British pulled out. The British left behind the structures they had built on Governors Island, but no trace of them survives; and the only reminder of this stirring period of the island's history might be British cannonballs and shell fragments buried in its soil.

Coastal Defense

The soldiers and civilians who labored with shovels and wheelbarrows to fortify Governors Island and thereby protect New York also shaped the island's future. For the next 50 years or more, its primary function was as part of the U.S. coastal defense establishment. America's emphasis on coastal defense (more accurately harbor defense, since the intent was not to defend long stretches of coastline), which began in the colonial period and whose line of descent can perhaps be traced to today's anti-ballistic missile program, is deeply rooted in national attitudes. With its restless energy absorbed in internal development, America's policy toward the outside world was basically defensive. Forts cannot be moved around like armies and navies to draw the nation into

¹² Discussed in Jones, *ibid.*, 347-49; but it should be noted that he was not present in New York during this period.

¹³ This is confirmed by several period maps, such as the "Holland Map" (1776) and the "British Headquarter Map" in Augustyn and Cohen, *Manhattan in Maps* (1997).

foreign entanglements. Indeed, the very existence of strong defenses, as 19th Century congressmen argued repeatedly, could deter war and shield the U.S. from involvement in foreign conflicts. There was an ingrained fear of large permanent armies, and in any case the thinly populated country could not afford an army large enough to protect its vast spaces. Coastal forts could be prepared in advance and occupied in emergencies by militiamen. Reliance on technology and armament would reduce casualties, as well as costs. Although building fortifications was less expensive than maintaining a large army and navy, it was still a major federal expense. As the only sustained federal construction program, it created an eager constituency among contractors.

American coastal defense can be divided into distinct periods. Historians generally recognize eight such “systems,” not all of which were carried to completion.¹⁴ Every 20 years or so a perceived threat would appear, prompting a nervous Congress to appropriate funding for a new generation of defenses. Usually enough time had elapsed since the previous crisis that the old fortifications had become dilapidated, or advancing technology would have made them obsolete. Systems have generally been defined as having nationwide scope, springing from a formal initiative, and employing common characteristics of design and armament. At first, although the defenses were determined by national priorities, there was considerable local variation, but gradually uniformity prevailed.

There was an interlude of uncertainty between the end of the War for Independence and the renewed use of Governors Island for military purposes. With no one to care for them, the buildings left by the British must have rapidly decayed. New York Governor George Clinton leased the island as a racetrack,¹⁵ and it was also used as a quarantine station from 1786 to 1790, when Columbia College was granted some sort of rights to the island. As Kings College the institution had been a bastion of toryism in colonial times, and its backers hoped that a change of name could make it an acceptable guardian of conservative principles in the federalist republic. Apparently the intent was for Columbia, crammed into an inadequate space west of City Hall Park, to use the proceeds from land sales to build a roomier campus uptown, rather than to transfer to Governors Island. A somewhat similar example existed in Boston, where in 1682 Samuel Ward willed Bumpkin Island to Harvard College so that rental income could support college operations. These tentative efforts to define a civilian role for Governors Island came to an abrupt end when it was called back into military service. It was as though the island had tried civilian attire but felt at last more comfortable in uniform.

In 1794, a year when the infant federal government made a number of far-reaching decisions about military matters, it launched what became known as the first system of coastal defense. Renewed tension with Great Britain was the immediate incentive. Some unfinished business from the War for Independence contributed, but

¹⁴ The standard division into periods was formulated by Emanuel R. Lewis in *Seacoast Fortifications of the United States* (various eds.).

¹⁵ This oft-repeated claim sounds dubious, but *Three Centuries* (16) provides a contemporary citation of sorts. It would be desirable to confirm the story, and indeed to learn more in general about this hazy interim of the island’s history.

most of the threats during this period were a direct spillover of the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars that kept Europe in almost continuous conflict from 1789 to 1815. On March 20, 1794 Congress appropriated money and authorized the appointment of engineers to construct fortifications at key locations. Since there were no trained American military engineers, the men appointed were mostly French. At New York, the defenses were supervised by Charles Vincent.¹⁶

Although this first system was a national program, which attempted to defend 21 seaports, there was great variation in the individual works. State governors had to approve the projects, and this was especially important in New York, where popular governor George Clinton had been a staunch anti-federalist and remained suspicious of federal power. Dissatisfied with the size of the congressional appropriation and the rapidity of its implementation, Clinton called on organizations of tradesmen, students and political groups to volunteer on the fortifications. Each group was assigned its own day, which made the enthusiastic labor something of a festive outing. An observer reported on May 24, 1794, “As I was getting up in the morning, I heard drums beating and fifes playing. I ran to the window, and saw a large body of people on the other side of the Governor’s House, with flags flying, and marching two and two towards the water-side.” It was “a procession of young tradesmen going in boats to Governor’s Island, to give the state a day’s work.” Although the writer was English and the defensive efforts were directed against his country, he still marveled: “How noble is this! How it cherishes unanimity and love for their country!”¹⁷ By 1796 work had progressed to the point that an official report could announce “Governor’s Island has been fortified with a fort made of earth, and two batteries under its protection, partly lined with brick masonry, two air furnaces, a large powder magazine, and a barrack for the garrison; the whole completed.”¹⁸

A treaty negotiated by John Jay, Chief Justice of the Supreme Court and an experienced diplomat, though unpopular in New York City and elsewhere, removed the immediate threat of war. The fort on Governors Island, one of the four major works of the first system, was named in his honor. Although large in dimension, it was an unreinforced earthwork, and it deteriorated rapidly once the emergency passed. Later in the 1790s, the U.S. became involved in a naval “quasi war” with revolutionary France, prompting a new round of defensive appropriations. In this period, considered to be a second phase of the first system, engineers made greater use of masonry, at least as a veneer. In 1800, in a gap between George Clinton’s terms as governor, New York State agreed to transfer Governors Island, as well as its neighbors Ellis and Bedloe’s (now Liberty) Islands to federal control for military purposes.

By 1801 Fort Jay was a square structure lined with some masonry, with arrowhead-shaped bastions projecting from each corner. These bastions, derived from the concepts of the 17th Century French marshal Vauban, protected the long exposed “curtain walls” of the fort. Beyond the main fort stood three ramparts to guard the channels

¹⁶ J.E. and H. W. Kaufmann, *Fortress America* (2004), 142.

¹⁷ Henry Wansey (English), quoted in Bayrd Still, *Mirror for Gotham* (1956), 65.

¹⁸ *American State Papers*, Military Affairs, 111, Timothy Pickering report on Fortifications, 1796.

around the island, which was roughly triangular, and discourage enemy landings. In the center of the fort stood a timber blockhouse, which had questionable practical value and did not survive long. The garrison was housed in barracks within the square of the fort, but, since the strategy of coastal defense depended on calling out large numbers of militia, the regular military complement was small. Still, the fact that Governors Island was garrisoned at all, with a detachment of about 50 soldiers through this period, confirms its importance.¹⁹ An 1800 map shows a powder magazine under the northeast bastion and barracks on the north and east sides of the “parade” (the enclosed central square).²⁰ An officer’s mention of a “handsome gateway” in an 1802 report has been taken to mean that the remarkable ornamental crest above the gate was already present. Surprisingly for such an unusual feature, documentary references to it are scanty, and there is no firm confirmation of its existence until the Civil War era. In the absence of documentation, it was inevitable that this embellishment would inspire legends, and a story grew up that the sculpture was the work of a skilled stonecutter who was imprisoned on the island.

As the struggle between Great Britain and Napoleonic France intensified, American maritime commerce was caught in the middle. Exasperated, President Jefferson in 1807 declared an embargo, which prohibited trade with all belligerents and soon had ruinous effects on American commerce. He also determined to build up the nation’s defenses. Reluctant to create a large permanent military establishment, he turned to coastal defense as a passive alternative, acceptable within his philosophy of limited federal government. This was the origin of the Second System, which sought to defend 30 vital harbors and has left enduring traces on Governors Island.

Much of the Second System works that are so conspicuous today are the legacy of Jonathan Williams, one of those distinctive individuals who periodically exerted a powerful influence on Governors Island. A grandnephew of Benjamin Franklin, Williams shared his distinguished relative’s wide-ranging curiosity. His diverse scientific interests, confirmed by his prominence in the American Philosophical Society, also impressed Thomas Jefferson, who named him the first commander of the Army Corps of Engineers when that organization was formed in 1802. Always sensitive to slights, Williams resigned in the following year, but Jefferson persuaded him to return as chief in 1805. He was thus in place to take charge when the defense program of 1807 was initiated. Although trained in Europe, he represented the first generation of American engineers, men who brought an end to the risky practice of relying on foreign experts.

At Fort Jay, which had been described in 1806 as being “in a state of absolute ruin,”²¹ Williams performed what amounted to a rebuilding. He extended two walls and added a ravelin to provide additional protection to the north face, but did not alter the basic Vauban-inspired trace. Jay’s treaty had become increasingly unpopular at a time when relations with Britain were deteriorating, and since it had been heavily altered, the

¹⁹ It appears that Governors Island was continuously garrisoned from 1794, beginning with Wayne’s Legion, followed by a newly recruited company of artilleryists and engineers, 1795.

²⁰ NARA Cartographic Div., Drawer 36, Sheet 16: “Plan of the Fort Jay . . . as it was in 1800.”

²¹ Quoted in Fort Jay HSR, 47.

fort that bore his name was renamed Fort Columbus in 1809. The reconstruction was considered to be complete by January 1810, and in the following year the fort, designed to accommodate 104 guns, was armed with 25 50-pounders, 57 18-pounders, and assorted field pieces.²² The striking parallel with the Governors Island in Boston harbor persisted, and in 1808 a Second System fort was started there. Originally called Fort Warren, the name was changed to Fort Winthrop in 1833, when work began on the massive new Fort Warren that still dominates Georges Island.

Jonathan Williams's masterpiece was a new fort entirely of his own design, employing concepts not previously seen in America. Drawing on the ideas of French military engineer Rene de Montalambert, Williams constructed a fort in circular form, able to accommodate three tiers of guns in protected "casemates." Although guns mounted on a stable platform such as the earth would always have an advantage over guns firing from a rolling ship, it was conceivable that a fleet might fire a concentrated broadside that could overwhelm a coastal fort. Williams's (and Montalambert's) idea was to counter this by massing artillery at a critical location so that it could out-duel even a powerful fleet. Thus, although the two forts on the island were considered part of the Second System and were informed by French military theory, they differed radically in design.

Williams anchored the new fort to a treacherous rock outcrop on the northwest point of the island and constructed it of Newark sandstone, brought over by barge from New Jersey. A passageway, lined with masonry, connected Fort Columbus and the new castle, about 200 yards apart. (In military terms this passage was called a covered or covert way, meaning that troops using it were protected, but it was not roofed.) The new fort, which most students consider the outstanding achievement of the Second System, was named Castle Williams in honor of its builder in 1810. This formidable work could mount 26 guns in each of the three levels, plus at least 25 of the powerful new 50-pound "Columbiads" on the open terrace, where they could fire "en barbette" (over the parapet). Unfazed by its glowering appearance, which led Washington Irving to describe Governors Island as "a fierce little warrior in a big cocked hat, breathing gunpowder and defiance to the world," the American habit of democratization figuratively disarmed the Castle by referring to it as a "cheesebox." New Yorkers may have already been cultivating their reputation for thinking on a colossal scale, as this cheesebox had an exterior diameter of 210 feet. Enormous cheeses were in the public consciousness, as residents of Cheshire, Massachusetts, had given President Jefferson a cheese for New Year's Day, 1802, that measured four feet in diameter and weighed 1235 pounds.²³

Castle Williams was essentially completed by the end of 1811, and in the following year Col. Williams constructed the South Battery, able to mount 14 guns, on

²² Ames W. Williams, "The Old Forts of New York Harbor," *Periodical* (full title unclear) Fall-Winter 1972, p.6; no original source provided. The Fort Jay HSR (52) says that 60 guns were mounted as of Dec. 10, 1811. In a time of rapid construction and defensive buildup, fluctuations in the reported number and types of guns at different times are not surprising, and discrepancies may also be caused by differing definitions of whether the guns were mounted.

²³ There was a political aroma to this cheese, which residents of the Berkshire County town produced in defiance of the eastern Massachusetts Federalist establishment, which detested Jefferson.

what was then the shoreline of Governors Island. By 1813, as illustrated by the Mangin map, the available space on the island was almost entirely occupied by fortifications, support facilities, and gardens. Williams also supervised construction of a star-shaped fort on Bedloe's Island and another on Ellis, or Oyster, Island. On the southern tip of Manhattan he built a fort similar to Castle Williams, intended to provide a cross-fire with its mate on Governors Island. This fort was tied to another formation of outlying rock; later connected by landfill to the Battery, it originally required a causeway to reach Manhattan. Due mainly to financial cutbacks this fort, now Castle Clinton, was never raised beyond its first tier. Other works on Manhattan, at the Narrows, and around Hell Gate rounded out the city's defenses.

Williams resigned in pique on July 31, 1812, largely over a dispute in which artillery men refused to take orders from him because he was an engineer officer. This was one of those issues in which a youthful military establishment, operating in a republic, had to set its ground rules. Almost simultaneously, the long-threatened war with Great Britain finally began. New Yorkers, living in a city that had not been successfully defended in 200 years, felt a mortal terror that the catastrophe of 1776 would be repeated. By October 1814 the city was protected by 570 artillery pieces, plus others on vessels. This complement of guns would have required 25,000 men, but most of them presumably could be called up on short notice.²⁴ It is possible that this formidable armament discouraged British attack, since their naval blockade was already effectively choking New York's commerce. After seizing Washington, D.C., in 1814, the Royal Navy moved against Baltimore, but its repulse at Fort Mc Henry would have strengthened the argument against testing the New York defenses. In later years, Robert Moses and others derided forts like Castle Clinton that "had never fired a shot." In reality, that was the finest compliment they could receive: fighting off an enemy could be glorious, but the real purpose of coastal defense was to discourage him from attacking at all.

Although Baltimore had resisted and New York had possibly deterred attack, there was widespread dissatisfaction with the performance of American coastal defenses in the War of 1812. Almost immediately after its conclusion, Secretary of War James Monroe convened a board, the first of several over the next 125 years, to examine the problem. This board's report in 1821 led to the Third System, which has left more than 60 impressive stone fortifications around the nation's coasts. One of the system's defining features was to continue moving defenses farther out from the city being protected. In New York this led to an emphasis on forts at the Narrows (Forts Lafayette, Hamilton, Richmond, and Tompkins) and at Throgs Neck (Fort Schuyler) in what is now The Bronx. By the close of the Third System New York City was defended by 12 forts.

The forts on Governors Island, although reduced in relative importance, continued to be part of the defensive system. At Fort Columbus considerable effort was devoted to facing the structure with granite to conform to Third System practice, and this work continued through the 1830s. At times work went slowly, first because of a cholera epidemic that brought the city's economy to a virtual standstill in 1832. Recovery was

²⁴ "J.C.B.," "The Defences of New York in 1812" *Journal of the Military Service Institution*, Vol. X, 1889, 248.

almost as troublesome, as “The constant employment afforded to mechanics and laborers of every description in the city of New York renders it very difficult to procure their services on the island.”²⁵ The completed fort had a graded “glacis” sloping to the water’s edge. Pleasing to the eye, this feature also served an important defensive purpose: attackers by land would have to charge and fire uphill, exposed all the while to devastating fire from men sheltered by the ditch and from guns behind the walls of the fort. Castle Williams, less flexible, remained essentially a Second System work. During a long interval of peace it apparently was allowed to deteriorate. An English officer visiting in 1832 reported “When I entered it through the small wicket door, I was nearly upset by a quantity of half-starved pigs, which rushed grunting up to me, as if attempting to gain the exterior of the fort, and compelled me to make strenuous use of my walking-stick. The interior was little better than a sty, and in a most unfinished state.”²⁶ (The porkers may have been brought in to provide a food supply for workers on the forts, as was the practice at Fort Warren in Boston.) From a distance this squalor was invisible, and another English visitor wrote that Governors Island “lies like an emerald on the sunny surface of the bay.”²⁷

The city across the bay was expanding rapidly, guided by a plan adopted just before the War of 1812 began. This plan imposed a relentless grid on the undeveloped portion of Manhattan north of Houston Street, altering the picturesque terrain to maximize the profits of real estate developers. Meanwhile, for similar reasons, the long-standing practice of filling the irregularities of Manhattan’s shoreline continued. As Manhattan expanded and Red Hook was joined more permanently to Brooklyn, many people believed that Governors Island was shrinking due to erosion, although the lack of accurate surveys makes it difficult to confirm.²⁸

The Third System was sometimes referred to as the permanent system, both because of the masonry it favored and because its advocates claimed it would meet the nation’s defense needs indefinitely. Jonathan Williams had made a similar claim for his castle, declaring it would “endure for ages.” In a structural sense this was true, though substantial reinforcement was needed as early as the 1830s;²⁹ but rapid advances in armament could not be halted, and many of the Third System works became obsolete before they were finished.

²⁵ *American State Papers*, Military Affairs, Vol. 5, 655: Report from Engineer Department, Nov. 15, 1835. A formal completion date for the fort was probably never assigned. There was no appropriation for fiscal 1835, though \$49,076 remained from previous balances, and it does not appear that major work occurred subsequently. A report in 1851 calculated that spending on the three Governors Island fortifications from 1831 to 1845 totaled \$269,467 (Serial #637, 32nd Congress, 1st Session, H.R. Executive Document 5, “Letter from the Secretary of War in Reference to Fortifications,” Dec. 11, 1851).

²⁶ E.T. Coke, *A Subaltern’s Furlough* (London, 1833), 146.

²⁷ Henry Tudor, *Narrative of a Tour in North America...* (London, 1834), 16.

²⁸ One observer in 1807 expressed the belief that constant encroachment of the shoreline had altered the currents, enlarging and deepening Buttermilk Channel (Samuel Latham Mitchell, *The Picture of New-York* [New York: I. Riley, 1807], 191).

²⁹ In 1835 “the exterior wall of the battery has been confined by tension braces, to the interior, to prevent its inclination outwards from the weight of the arches and casemates above.” (*American State Papers*, vol. 5, Military Affairs, 655: Report from Engineer Department, Nov. 15, 1835).

Added Missions: the Antebellum Years

After the peace of 1815 the U.S. Army, per usual practice, was greatly reduced, but it retained a more impressive standing force than it had previously. In subsequent decades it steadily assumed the characteristics of an established institution. Dominated by the towering personality of Gen. Winfield Scott, it developed a clear hierarchy and a structure of regulations and procedures. However, even Scott's commanding bulk could not insulate the Army from the winds of politics. Changing administrations at Washington subjected the military to frequent reorganizations and disruptive fluctuations in support. The Jacksonians, who saw themselves as successors to Jefferson, remained suspicious of the military, so that in some years even funding for coast defense was reduced to a trickle—one reason construction of the Third System dragged on so long.

Castle Clinton was returned to civilian control, but there was no thought of following that example on Governors Island, which remained firmly under military ownership. Persistent doubts about the island's defensive value could not be silenced, but although in 1840 Chief Engineer Col. Joseph G. Totten conceded that "the destruction of the city might be going on simultaneously with the contest between these forts and the fleet," he maintained that the forts remained valuable as a "last barrier."³⁰ While coast defense, the most visible function, remained paramount, the island gradually assumed other missions, so that its operation became more diffuse. In 1816 the headquarters for the Third Military District was transferred to Governors Island, and in 1821 another reorganization made it the headquarters of the Eastern Division. As one of only two such commands, the island became one of the most important military bases in the country. It was the site of General Scott's headquarters during much of this period, though he did not live on the island. Scott, a military intellectual, enjoyed socializing with New York's upper crust. Already New York was a thoroughly business-oriented community, and the General, with his knowledge of the West and military matters, probably offered valuable investment advice.

Governors Island's promising role as a major military headquarters lasted only until 1827 and was not resumed until later in the century. Meanwhile, as the Army, with a total strength of more than 5000, increasingly stabilized and adopted a routine, the island took on more of the trappings of a permanent military post. Housing for the garrison was a vital concern, and in the 1830s the Army constructed four new barracks inside the walls of Fort Columbus. These solid brick and stone structures not only improved life for the soldiers but left more room for formations in the center of the fort, so that it could truly function as a "parade." In the following decade a new Commanding Officer's house (Building 1), designed by a prominent architect Martin E. Thompson, testified to the permanence of the military establishment." The first detached housing for subordinate officers, two double sets of quarters (Buildings 4 and 5) were added in the 1850s.

³⁰ U.S. Serial Set #1145, 37th Congress, 2nd Session, House Report 86, Appendix 1, p.37; "Report on the defence of the Atlantic Frontier," May 10, 1840, p.185. In 1851 Castle Williams boasted armament consisting of 20 42-pounders, 26 32-pounders, 18 24-pounders and three 8-inch howitzers. South Battery had five 32-pounders, 5 18-pounders, and four 8-inch howitzers (Serial #637, 32nd Congress, 1st Session, H.R. Executive Document 5, "Letter from the Secretary of War in Reference to Fortifications," Dec. 11, 1851).

One of the more interesting structures was the so-called “Dutch House” (Building 3).³¹ Built in 1846 as a storehouse, it was intentionally designed in a revival style a full generation before the Centennial Exhibition, which most scholars credit with inspiring the Colonial Revival. One factor may be the formation of the St. Nicholas Society in New York City in 1835, with the announced goal of perpetuating Nieu Amsterdam heritage amid the influx of Yankee “go-getters.” With a permanent garrison and soldiers transferring from remote frontier posts, medical care became a pressing concern, leading to the building of a post hospital (Building 9) in 1839.³² Rev. John McVickar, the well-connected chaplain of Columbia College, persuaded General Scott to lease a small plot for an Episcopal chapel, overcoming the Army’s usual reluctance to construct religious buildings.³³ This was the original Chapel of St. Cornelius the Centurion, dedicated 1847.

Although the Mexican War (1846-48) was generally unpopular in the Northeast, a regiment of New York volunteer infantry was mustered on Governors Island. This war provided experience for the generation of officers who led both sides in the Civil War. Since Governors Island was an important post, many of these officers passed through it during their careers. As a young engineer officer, Robert E. Lee was stationed at Fort Hamilton, Brooklyn, in the late 1830s and probably visited Governors Island. Capt. Ulysses S. Grant was stationed on the island for several months in 1852.

The New York Arsenal, an important but unrelated function, transferred to Governors Island from Manhattan in 1832. As part of the Ordnance Department this entity was largely separate from other military operations on the island. Though the distinction was often blurred, ordnance officers tried to distinguish between armories, which manufactured weapons and materiel, and arsenals, which stored and repaired them. At the start of the Civil War there were 22 arsenals scattered throughout the nation. Few of them were situated in conjunction with coast defense installations, though Fortress Monroe in Tidewater Virginia was a conspicuous exception. Beyond the fact that Governors Island was already under military ownership and had a storehouse in use, the reasons for choosing it as an arsenal site are not entirely clear. Retroactive justifications given decades later when officers were fighting to retain the facility are not fully explanatory. Governors Island offered docking facilities for the arsenal, but that feature was not considered necessary at most arsenals. The dock made it easier to service the cluster of defensive facilities around New York harbor, but Boston, which also had fortifications scattered on numerous islands, managed without a seaside arsenal.

Beginning in the 1830s the arsenal constructed a cluster of service and storage buildings on its separate six-and a half acre plot on Governors Island. This must have meant some loss of defensive capability, since in the area occupied by the arsenal the glacis presumably had extended to the water’s edge. Officers from the various Army

³¹ Converted to officers’ quarters 1922 (per HABS).

³² Converted to headquarters building 1879, later officers’ housing (per HABS).

³³ The use of a lease arrangement is described in *Three Centuries*, 28, and seems valid unless proven otherwise. It receives indirect confirmation in terms of the later “license” described in Note 50. However, it would be desirable to locate the original documentation.

branches studied the site and apparently concluded that the arsenal did not block an important field of fire. One of the arsenal buildings was a residence for its commanding officer (now incorporated in Building 135), and it is tempting to speculate that this development prompted the construction of Building 1 in 1843, as the post commander sought to demonstrate his prerogatives. Many of the permanent arsenal buildings survive, although the function was transferred to Raritan Arsenal, New Jersey, in 1920, following World War I.

In the Civil War

The coming of the Civil War thrust both combatants into a situation they could not have foreseen or prepared for. Forts guarding southern ports turned their guns against men who in many cases had built them. Conversely, since the Confederate Navy did not present a serious threat, forts in the North had little purpose unless, as Jefferson Davis hoped, European powers came in on the Confederate side. Whether or not it faced a credible threat, Governors Island contained massive firepower: 52 32-pounders in casemates and five 15-inch and 16 ten-inch Rodmans en barbette at Castle Williams; and 15-inch Rodmans in each salient and 72 ten-inch Rodmans along the seaward curtain at Fort Columbus.³⁴ (The Rodmans were scientifically designed weapons developed by ordnance officer Thomas Rodman.)

As they began a long series of improvisations, neither of the opposing armies could anticipate the enormous scale of the land campaigns or the horrific casualties that would result. Governors Island expanded its recruiting and processing functions. Despite its confined space, thousands of soldiers passed through on their way to the battlefield. Islands like this and Georges Island in Boston, occupied by Fort Warren, were well-suited to such activities since their isolation reduced temptations such as desertion for young recruits. The arsenal was exceptionally active, leading to complaints that it was too cramped.

A major problem that took both sides by surprise was the need to deal with prisoners of war. Even though in the first part of the war many captives were exchanged, they still had to be held for long periods. In the emergency, existing facilities intended for other purposes were pressed into service. Inevitably, coastal forts in the North such as Castle Williams were converted to use as prisons. Fort Lafayette, Fort Schuyler and Fort Wood on Bedloe's Island in New York City and Fort Warren in Boston also held rebel prisoners. Castle Williams, considered unsuitable to house a garrison, held up to a thousand southern prisoners at a time for short periods. An army surgeon reported that "They are crowded into an ill-ventilated building which has always been an unhealthy one when occupied by large bodies of men,"³⁵ and a number of prisoners died and were

³⁴ I have not been able to relocate the original reference. The Fort Jay HSR states that on July 12, 1861, Castle Williams had 78 guns and Fort Columbus 87. Unless the tallies were made on the same day, small discrepancies in numbers should not be too worrisome.

³⁵ Army surgeon William Sloan, Sep. 30, 1861, quoted in Castle Williams HSR, 40.

buried on Governors Island.³⁶ In the early part of the war, when it was still suffused with the romantic postures of Sir Walter Scott's novels, captured officers were treated somewhat as guests. Even later they were provided with better accommodations than the enlisted men, being housed in Fort Columbus or adjacent buildings, rather than the dungeon-like Castle.

With little else to occupy their time, many prisoners left accounts of their stay on the island. One captured Confederate (actually a native of Maine) observed, "We have a splendid view of New York, Brooklyn, Jersey City and all the surroundings both North and East River and anything that is going on in the Bay. We could not have chosen a better place for imprisonment if we had made our own selection."³⁷ With his fellow prisoners in Fort Columbus he started a weekly newspaper and played interminable games of cards. Obviously he remained in good health, for on one occasion when New Yorkers came over to gaze at the secessionists, he was interested to note that "The wind was blowing quite hard at the time, often exposing something that made our long exiled thoughts wonder, as our eyes have not feasted on White Stockings and Gaiter Boots for a long time."³⁸ Somewhat ironically, this man had been captured at Fort Pulaski in Georgia, whose quick surrender to Union bombardment represented the doom of the entire elaborate Third System of coastal defense.

On July 4, 1863, Confederate Lieutenant General John C. Pemberton, who had served at Fort Columbus as a young artillery officer in 1838³⁹, surrendered the vital bastion of Vicksburg, Mississippi, to General Grant. On the same day General Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia began its retreat from Gettysburg. Despite these stunning successes, the North remained far from final victory. With few illusions remaining about the nature of the war, the supply of volunteer manpower had dried up, and both sides had instituted drafts. Application of the draft law set off riots in New York City on July 13 that quickly turned into race riots and burst beyond the control of the metropolitan police. The population of the city had exploded to over 800,000 by 1860, and its composition was quite different than it had been early in the century, with large numbers of Irish and German immigrants. Many of the Irish, who apparently made up the bulk of the rioters, feared job competition from freed blacks and had little desire to fight in what they considered a rich man's war.

Facing the largest disturbances ever seen in the United States, officials called for federal troops, but so much troop strength had been drained by the Gettysburg campaign that few soldiers remained in the city. Many of those were members of the Invalid Corps, fit only for light duty. Soldiers from Governors Island defended key locations such as the

³⁶ The Fort Jay HSR says that at least 45 died, but that number may include Union deserters who were also imprisoned on the island. (See discussion of 1885 reburials, p.18.)

³⁷ Roger S. Durham, ed., *A Confederate Yankee: The Journal of Edward William Drummond, a Confederate Soldier from Maine* (Univ. Tennessee, 2004), Apr. 24, 1862.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, June 5, 1862.

³⁹ Pemberton was graduated from West Point in 1837. Several Internet biographies state that he was stationed at Fort Columbus in 1838 (e.g., <http://www.aztecclub.com/bios/pemberton.htm>). I was not able to find one that gave the exact dates of his service there. *Three Centuries* (34) says Pemberton "as a 4th Artillery shave-tail, had commanded Fort Columbus in 1837," which seems highly unlikely.

Sub-treasury building. Probably they also guarded non-federal facilities, which raised constitutional and jurisdictional questions, especially since Governor Horatio Seymour was not supportive of the draft. In addition, Governors Island became, in effect, a safe-deposit box for valuable draft records and treasury deposits. It was a further example of how the war had turned things upside down and forced the post into duties for which it had not been intended. Later, a legend grew up that rioters had attempted to row out to the island to capture supplies and weapons and were repulsed by the civilian work force.⁴⁰ It was only after combat troops were brought back from distant battlefields that the riots were suppressed, and the draft did not resume until August 19.

1865-1917: Reshaping Governors Island in a Reshaped Army

In the decades after the Civil War, Governors Island, like the army in general, experienced long stretches of dulling tedium, interrupted by spasms of frenzied wartime energy. In many respects this pattern replicated and magnified the “hurry up and wait” routine of the individual soldier. During this period two characteristic activities on the island dwindled toward extinction, while another—the headquarters function--was renewed and became paramount. This function was restored after a lapse of some 50 years when the post became headquarters, Military Division of the Atlantic and Department of the East, in 1878. These administrative entities had been created June 27, 1865, in the closing days of the Civil War. Originally comprising five departments, the division had been consolidated to two by 1878.⁴¹ Fort Columbus managed army activity from Virginia northward, and east of the Mississippi, except for Illinois.

Since November 1872, the division had been commanded by Major General Winfield Scott Hancock, who, especially on horseback presented such a magnificent, confidence-inspiring figure that he was known as “Hancock the Superb.” Apparently without much effort on his part, he was nominated by the Democratic Party as its candidate for president in 1880. Without noticeably interrupting his routine on Governors Island, he came within 10,000 votes of his opponent, James A. Garfield, although the distortions of the Electoral College made the margin seem wider. Two earlier elections had been won by General Grant, and Garfield was also a Civil War general, though not in the regular army. With only three exceptions, Hancock carried every state south of the Mason-Dixon Line and nothing above; almost as though the election of 1860, secession, and the war had never occurred. Hancock died February 2, 1886, and the removal of his coffin was an occasion of solemn ceremony on the island. He was succeeded by another Civil War general, O.O. Howard, who had lost an arm in battle and, unlike most Civil War generals, was a dedicated abolitionist and friend of the freedmen.

⁴⁰ Like all such legends, this has great tenacity. It was vividly recounted in Sharon Seitz and Stuart Miller, *The Other Islands of New York City* (Countryman Press, 1996), 18.

⁴¹ Evolution of this command thru 1870 is described in “Outline Description of Posts & Stations of Troops in the Military Division of the Atlantic . . .” (Philadelphia: Headquarters Military Division of the Atlantic, October 1870.) This report also describes the buildings at Fort Columbus. The Atlantic was one of three divisions and the department was one of two.

Hancock was reform-minded and, like the officer for whom he was named, something of a military thinker. He brought a renaissance to Governors Island, introducing city water (in mains under Buttermilk, Channel), exterior lighting, and free ferry service. He organized an officers' club and housed it in the South Battery, displacing the "band boys" who had lived there to barracks in Fort Columbus.⁴² To enhance the exchange of ideas among officers, he started a Military Service Institution and set up a military museum. Housed in Building 104, a former Arsenal storehouse, it lasted through World War I, closing in 1922.

The changed role of the island had immediate and substantial effects on its physical appearance. The former hospital was converted to use as the headquarters. With the departure of the recruiting and processing function in 1878, there were fewer troops present and thus less need for housing enlisted men. Conversely, more officers and their families were stationed there. The Army, of course, was a rigidly hierarchical institution, in which, unlike the civilian world, the order of precedence was clearly codified and visible. Privileges of rank were most evident in housing, even though, as a cost-saving measure, the Army turned to standardized housing plans, adapted to regional climate and stylistic traditions. Under Hancock's administration nine sets officer's residences (Buildings 6, 7, 8, 10, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18) were constructed in 1878, facing what was commonly called "The Green," more recently named Nolan Park after a commanding officer, Maj. Gen. Dennis E. Nolan. Quarters 14 through 20 were informally termed "Colonel's Row,"⁴³ while a group constructed in the 1890s and early 1900s comprising Buildings 403-409 was called "Regimental Row" or "Brick Row."

These clusters of handsome residences give the older portion of the island a pleasing harmony of style and appearance. In those quiet years Governors Island seemed a bucolic place. A writer for *Scribner's Magazine* observed that "the children are omnipresent, and their amusements reflect the military bent given to their fancies by the surroundings. There are enough toy drums, trumpets, cocked hats and wooden cavalry-horses to stock a shop." The respected *King's Handbook* depicted the scene in idyllic terms: "The center of the island is elevated thirty feet above high-water mark and laid out as a parade-ground and a handsome park, with band-stand, brick walks, trees, flowers and shrubbery. A score or more of pretty houses, the residences of the officers, surround this park."⁴⁴ The contrast with the remote frontier outposts that were more characteristic of the Army between 1865 and 1898 must have stunned newly arrived officers.

An incident in 1885 suggested that many secrets lie hidden in the layers of Governors Island's military past. Probably because space was too scarce to waste on the dead, the Army decided to close the cemetery on the southwest corner of the island and transfer the remains to Cypress Hill National Cemetery on the Brooklyn-Queens border. This may have been part of a larger initiative in the Army, as graves at Boston's Fort

⁴²Their former home was described as "A building, 144x23, in south battery, occupied by Music Boys, capable of accommodating about 100, stone basement, brick walls, slate roof, two stories and basement, with iron verandahs in front," *Ibid.*, 23.

⁴³ Need to clarify, if possible, which houses comprised "Colonels Row" in the 19C.

⁴⁴ Moses King, *King's Handbook of New York City* (1892), 499.

Warren were likewise moved to another island. Fearful of disease, since many of the interred had died in epidemics, contractors on Governors Island worked only when the temperature fell below freezing. They opened 530 presumed graves, but found no remains in 42. Burial records accounted for only 309 interments, including some 20 Confederate prisoners.⁴⁵

With the island primarily devoted to other purposes, coastal defense maintained a tenuous presence. By the end of the Civil War the catastrophic obsolescence of the vaunted Third System was undeniable, but engineers and artillerymen were unsure of a unifying concept to replace it. Agreeing that earthworks were preferable to masonry fortifications and that dispersed batteries were better than the vertical concentration of guns stressed under the previous system, the Army launched a new program of defenses in 1870. This plan affected Governors Island, as it included construction of a barbette battery extending southeast from Castle Williams almost to the South Battery, with positions for 13 15-inch Rodman guns and 14 of the 10-inchers.⁴⁶ This battery was partially constructed 1871-72, with eight magazines built and foundations prepared for eight others, but then funding was halted.⁴⁷ This was the fate of the entire abortive 1870 program, which amounted to a “fourth system,” though it was never called that. On Governors Island the incomplete works were obliterated by later construction.

Still, the island’s role in coastal defense was not quite extinct. Although it is difficult to reconcile conflicting and changeable tallies, as late as 1899 the three old forts mounted some 39 10-inch and five 15-inch Rodmans, five 100-lb. Parrotts, and assorted mortars, converted rifles and antique smoothbore pieces.⁴⁸ The count in 1909 was even higher, suggesting that old guns had been brought there from elsewhere around the harbor.⁴⁹ None of these had any practical defensive value (some were used for saluting visiting warships); nor did anyone propose to emplace large modern guns on the island—if enemy ships got through the outer defenses to Governors Island, the city would already be at their mercy. Nevertheless, planners still saw a defensive role for the island and in 1901 advocated placing 12 mobile guns on field carriages to defend against light minesweeping vessels and torpedo boats.⁵⁰ It does not appear that such guns were actually deployed. Moreover, there would be a question of who would man them, since the artillery detachment that had moved in when the recruiting function was discontinued in 1878 was replaced by infantry in 1894 (except for a brief interlude during the Spanish-American War of 1898).

⁴⁵ Wright & Binzen, “Archeological Overview and Assessment,” 66. Additional information provided by Christopher Meeks to Michael Shaver. Relative to epidemics, it might be worth mentioning removal of “Rotten Row” at this point.

⁴⁶ NARA Cartographic Div. Drawer 250, Sheet 4-2 (Dec. 12, 1873); 250 3-14.

⁴⁷ Glen M. Williford, “The Transitional Coast Defense Generation: American Seacoast Defenses in the 1870s,” (ms, 2005).

⁴⁸ Lt.Col. W.H.H. Benyaurd, Corps of Engineers, “Armament Sketch, forts on Governors Island,” Dec. 31, 1899 (NARA Cartographic Div., Drawer 250, sheet 8-14).

⁴⁹ “Report of Completed Batteries, etc., Defenses of New York Harbor at Southern and Eastern Entrances, for year ending Dec. 31, 1909,” NARA RG77, Entry 103, file 49105.

⁵⁰ U.S. Army Board of Engineers, “Revised project for Southern Entrance to New York Harbor,” April 29, 1901; provided by Glen M. Williford.

The other long-established activity on the island, the arsenal, also slid toward extinction. Building 110, the last major arsenal building to be constructed (in the 1870s), was intended primarily to store obsolete weapons. The arsenal had become a collection point for this kind of military detritus, described in official reports as a “large accumulation of obsolete, worn-out and useless stores,”⁵¹ and by the end of the century its survival seemed doubtful.

On the other hand, the prison function continued, after 1915 operated as a branch of the Disciplinary Barracks headquartered at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. Alcatraz Island off San Francisco was the Pacific branch. (These facilities should not be confused with the later federal penitentiaries in those places.) The five massive 15-inch Rodmans at Castle Williams were mounted “en barbette” on the parapet. Below them, in casemates converted to cells, prisoners lived, although an 1870 report had found the structure “unfit for quarters by reason of dampness, especially in mid-summer.”⁵² Most of the prisoners were incarcerated for relatively minor offenses and their treatment seems not to have been severe. The *Scribners* reporter in 1881 found that “The prisoners are not deprived of sunshine and cannot complain of austere treatment. They are employed about the grounds of the fort, and though they are guarded in deference to the military code by a soldier with loaded musket and revolver, they usually find so much fellow-feeling in him that their industry is not overtaxed.” Guided by progressive principles that were taking hold at some civilian prisons, authorities at Governors Island generally tried to reform offenders to become useful soldiers and citizens.

Progressive concepts figured prominently in a sweeping discussion of the island’s future around the turn of the 20th Century, related to larger shifts in the Army’s structure and mission. The decade of the 1890s was heralded by the Census Bureau’s famous pronouncement that a discernible frontier no longer existed and closed with the United States in possession of a far-flung colonial empire. Many of the abundance of western forts and posts were abandoned, and the Army concentrated its strength nearer to big cities and transportation facilities. Since land was scarce and costly, existing installations were used where possible. Governors Island must not have been capable of housing all the administrative functions it was assigned, since the Army maintained an eight-storey office building at the corner of Whitehall and Pearl Streets, near the ferry pier.⁵³

Just at the time Governors Island was becoming more valuable to the Army, it faced the greatest threat to military control since 1814. Around 1890 the island was proposed for an immigration station to replace Castle Garden (the former Castle Clinton). Eventually this function was transferred to Ellis Island. Proposals to return the island to the city for use as a public park, beginning as early as 1888, presented a more serious threat. New York City, which already included parts of former Westchester County that became the Borough of The Bronx, had consolidated with Brooklyn, Staten Island and several towns in Queens in 1898 to form Greater New York. Before the merger Brooklyn

⁵¹ Cited in HABS *Overview*, 12.

⁵² “Military Division of the Atlantic . . .,” 1870, p.23.

⁵³ Described and depicted in *King’s Handbook*, 500.

itself had been the third largest city in the United States; now the total population of the metropolis reached three million. Sections of Manhattan such as the Lower East Side were among the most densely populated areas in the world, and this crowding was unrelieved by open space—an affront and challenge to reformers. Their belief in the meliorative value of parks inspired a proposal to capture Governors Island.

The Army waged a vigorous campaign to retain its valuable island real estate. Each corps rallied to protect its holdings: Ordnance claimed a continuing need for the arsenal; the Engineers argued the need to maintain defensive capabilities; the Infantry cited the island's value as a mobilization center. Thus, instead of ceding Governors Island, the Army demanded additional land so its operations could be expanded. Title to some contiguous land underwater had been conveyed in 1880, and in 1903 New York State surrendered additional underwater territory.⁵⁴ This cession allowed Governors Island to expand from less than 70 acres to 172—almost certainly more dry land than had been present when first seen by Europeans. (Supporters of the enlargement argued that the island was being restored to its colonial dimensions. Since the first maps with anything approaching accurate scale date only to the War for Independence at the earliest, no one can be sure of the island's original size, and the problem is compounded by the fact that it was surrounded by ever-changing tidal land.) Fortunately for the Army, the expansion coincided with the building of New York City's first subways. A sure sign of New York's metropolitan greatness, subway construction started in 1900, and the first line of the Interborough Rapid Transit—New York's familiar IRT--went into service October 27, 1904. Spoil from this and the subsequent phase was hauled out on barges to create the "new" portion of Governors Island. Although the contract was contentious at times, by 1912 Manhattan's varied terrain had provided materials ranging from bedrock to sand that were needed in the landfill.

Perhaps defensive over resisting the demands to yield Governors Island, Secretary of War Elihu Root brought in America's premier architectural firm, Mc Kim, Mead and White to design a landscape for the island. Root, though associated with Theodore Roosevelt's progressivism, had actually been brought to Washington by President Mc Kinley. Root, Roosevelt and the three architects were all members of a tight, elite New York social circle. The precise sequence of events and the thought processes behind them deserve further study, as does the broader theme of the Army's impulse toward beautification. Though peripheral to the military mission, this attitude is visible in the Third System forts, the mid-19th Century development of Springfield Armory, and most distinctly at the Presidio in San Francisco. There, beginning in 1883 and perhaps inspired by nearby Golden Gate Park, a desolate, windswept waste was transformed into a lush parklike setting in which military activity flourished. Since the Presidio was headquarters of the Military Division of the Pacific, it had many parallels to Governors Island and both were coveted military assignments. By 1900 the urge to make Army posts attractive and

⁵⁴ Lewis W. Call, "United States Military Reservations, National Cemeteries, and Military Parks: Title, Jurisdiction, Etc.," (USGPO, 1907, p.219) gives as references Book of Patents No. 44, p.604, records of Patents in the office of New York Secretary of State for the grant approved by the state legislature May 7, 1880, conveying lands covered with water contiguous to the island; and Book of Patents No. 50, p.386 for grant dated Mar. 7, 1901 and *ibid.*, p.389, for grant dated June 5, 1903, conveying additional jurisdiction.

permanent had been subsumed under the “City Beautiful” branch of the progressive movement, which employed Beaux Arts styling to create more livable cities. This goal had become widely accepted among the officer corps: in 1907; for example, a board planning the expansion of Fort Andrews, a coastal defense installation in Boston, advocated placing buildings “with regard to landscape effect and general beautification.”

Root was also a supporter of historic preservation, rejecting calls to destroy the old forts even though a board had recommended the demolition of Fort Columbus, which blocked approximately a quarter of the island from being turned to more productive use.⁵⁵ In a 1901 memo he recommended that new structures “should be in harmony” with the venerable forts. Perhaps this concern for history led to the restoration of the original name Fort Jay for the fort and the installation on January 25, 1904. In another nod to history, a new and more imposing edition of the St. Cornelius the Centurion chapel was completed in 1905 and became a repository for flags and other military relics.⁵⁶

As befitted a prestige posting, many of the Army’s outstanding officers served at Governors Island. Among them were Major-General Arthur Mac Arthur and Brigadier-General Frederick Dent Grant, son of the Civil War commander, who had three tours of duty on the island before his death in 1912. After some interim officers filled the post, Grant was succeeded in 1914 by probably the most influential military man of the time, General Leonard Wood. An activist with superb connections and political ambitions of his own, Wood exemplified the progressivism of the era as applied to military affairs. With the onset of World War I he waged an uphill and often unpopular struggle to increase the nation’s military preparedness.

An Aviation Episode

The dirt had hardly settled on the “new” portion of Governors Island when it was put to a use that had been completely unanticipated when the filling began. So rapid was the advance of aviation in its first decade that the new flat space in the heart of the metropolis gained renown as a staging ground for some pioneering feats of air travel. During the Hudson-Fulton celebration of 1909, Wilbur Wright set up shop on Governors Island and flew around the Statue of Liberty in what historians consider the first flight over water in America. It so happened that the proud liner *Lusitania*, whose sinking with great loss of life was to shock American opinion during World War I, was passing beneath. On October 4 Wright flew up the Hudson as far as Grant’s Tomb. A newspaper reporter captured the excitement of early air travel when he wrote “The sight took your breath away. It was all so new, all so totally different, and more thrilling than one thought it was going to be. There is nothing else like it.”⁵⁷ Another prominent early aviator, Glenn Curtiss, was present at the time and in the following year won a prize by flying from

⁵⁵ Root’s memo on the subject is cited in the Castle Williams HSR, 70.

⁵⁶ Call, “Military Reservations, etc.”, 219, refers to a license granted by the Army Mar. 30, 1905, to the Corporation of Trinity Church to erect and maintain a new chapel. There is also a reference to a license dated Aug. 11, 1868, to occupy public quarters. The chapel was approved and designed in 1905, but it should be determined whether it was completed that year or 1906.

⁵⁷ Quoted in Noah Adams, *The Flyers: In Search of Wilbur and Orville Wright* (Crown, 2003), 132.

Albany to New York, landing at Governors Island. Not long afterward on the island Major Henry H. “Hap” Arnold began a career in flying that led to his command of the Army Air Forces in World War II. During the previous World War an aviation training center, approved by General Wood, functioned on the island.

After that war numerous proposals to use Governors Island for a civilian airport arose. New York’s dynamic congressman and mayor Fiorello La Guardia, who loved new things—even the subway was old hat to his way of thinking—was an enthusiastic supporter of the idea. Again the Army resisted, even though many of the proposals allowed it to retain its holdings on the old portion of the island. La Guardia, famed for his expressive language, described Governors Island as a “playground for generals who like to play golf and give garden parties.”⁵⁸ The battle lasted nearly 15 years, not reaching its culmination until 1936. By then it had become obvious that progress in aviation had rendered the site hopelessly inadequate as a metropolitan airport. Even Crissy Field at the Presidio, where the Army had maintained the first Air Coast Defense station on the Pacific coast, was closed for similar reasons around that time.⁵⁹ One of the last of several parallels between the Governors Islands in New York and Boston was that the Massachusetts island was leveled and absorbed into what became Logan Airport in 1946.

In the World Wars and Beyond

When the United States entered World War I in April 1917, the Mc Kim, Mead & White plan for the “new” part of Governors Island had not been executed. The reasons are unclear but may be due simply to the fact that the soil had not compacted enough to allow permanent structures. Nor had the occasional use for aviation left any enduring mark. With the coming of war the vacant area quickly filled with more than 70 temporary structures, mostly warehouses, totaling more than 30 million square feet of floor space. One of the new structures was an engine house, which sheltered locomotives for the island’s railroad, built to haul freight from the pier to the various storage buildings. All this carried out a plan described 15 years earlier by Secretary Root that the island “should be made a great depot for the receipt and distribution of supplies and a base for the government’s use in fitting out any expedition which might be necessary.” A black labor battalion was stationed on the island and did much of the construction and transport work, since in the segregated army of the time African Americans were impeded from joining combat or technical units.

The 22nd Infantry Regiment, a Regular Army unit, was brought in from the West to garrison Governors Island. Its main function was to guard transportation facilities against sabotage, but it participated in the first U.S. military action when on April 6, 1917, immediately after the declaration of war, its troops seized German shipping in New York harbor. The enormous liner *Vaterland* was a conspicuous prize. In its first decade the military potential of aviation had become apparent, and the Coast Artillery Corps added anti-aircraft to its responsibilities. During the war, three anti-aircraft guns were

⁵⁸ Quoted in Seitz and Miller, *Other Islands*, 19.

⁵⁹ Stephen A. Haller, *The Last Word in Airfields: San Francisco’s Crissy Field* (Golden Gate National Parks Assoc., 2001).

emplaced on the island. General John J. Pershing left from Governors Island May 28, 1917, to take command of the American Expeditionary Force in France, but because of the submarine menace he slipped away in secret, with no parades or fanfare. Recognition came later, when the headquarters building (125) was dedicated as Pershing Hall in 1954. After the war many streets and features on the island were given names reminiscent of American battles in France, so that a mood of the Great War lingers. As late as 1958 a French military attaché planted a tree from the Argonne Forest at Meuse Argonne Point (just east of the parking lot for Building 140).

Following the war, the Army reorganized itself from six territorial departments into nine corps, with Governors Island the headquarters of the Second Corps. This was part of a larger effort to retain an effective military force and avoid the ruinous cutbacks that had followed previous wars. Instead, rampant isolationism took hold, at least in Congress, and before long the Army was reduced to a point where it could barely sustain itself, much less deal with proliferating new developments. On Governors Island the scene that greeted visitors was not the elegant vision of Mc Kim, Mead and White but flimsy, rundown temporary buildings that had been intended to last only a few years and were none too attractive at best. Although most were removed, others, by necessity, remained in use, even as barracks. Thus, in 1927 a visiting congressman exclaimed bluntly “From what one sees from the water side, it is a dump.”⁶⁰ With most of the storehouses gone, the island’s industrial railroad became unnecessary and was removed around 1930.

During those years soldiers on Governors Island had a curiously contrasting relationship with the city. These juxtapositions have always captivated photographers, who recorded masked soldiers conducting chemical warfare training against a backdrop of the Manhattan skyline.⁶¹ Two companies of the 22nd Infantry were dispatched to Manhattan to maintain order after the Wall Street bombing on September 16, 1922. Officers on Governors Island trained bank clerks, including women, in the use of handguns to combat a “crime epidemic” in the city. In the most popular interaction, crowds of New Yorkers took the ferry to watch polo games on the island. The Army had created a polo field on the recently cleared south end of the island in the mid-1920s. Beyond its desirable upper-class associations, polo had practical value as training for cavalymen. As a tradition-minded organization, the Army was hardly ready to concede that after several thousand years the use of mounted troops was nearing its end. In a similar vein, officers from Governors Island participated in New York horse shows. Sharing it with civilians may have been the Army’s way of compensating for not yielding the entire island for park use; but these interactions were carefully controlled, and the public probably had only a dim idea of how the military operated there.

Toward the end of the 1920s, funding slowly filtered through for a major building program. Most conspicuous was Liggett Hall (Building 400), intended to provide full living and training facilities for an entire regiment. Designed by the Mc Kim, Mead & White firm (the three principals were dead by then) and completed in 1930, it supplied

⁶⁰ New York *Times*, Mar. 6, 1927, cited in HRS.

⁶¹ Photos in park collection (also applicable to other scenes described in this paragraph).

unmistakable testimony to the Army's intention to remain on Governors Island and the importance it attached to this post in the center of American finance and cultural achievement. LaGuardia suspected that the orientation of this structure was designed to prevent the island from being used as an airfield, though agitation in that regard continued for several more years. For whatever reason, the enormous building had the effect of creating a divide between the new and old portions of the island. Liggett Hall was joined by several large brick officers' quarters, NCO housing, a new hospital, nurses' quarters, and a new school, further evidence of the post's importance in a time of barebones budgets. Together, these buildings convey a harmonious if conventional architectural grouping, like some college campuses of the period.

Arrogant fascist aggression in the 1930s gave warning that the U.S., however reluctantly, might have to prepare for another war. Construction of new buildings on Governors Island continued, with assistance from a New Deal agency, the Works Progress Administration (WPA). This organization generally did not construct large buildings, but added numerous sidewalks, garages, loading docks, etc. and repaired existing buildings. Under a federal arts program, T. Loftin Johnson painted murals depicting scenes from American military history through World War I on the walls of Building 125.⁶² Once the U.S. entered the war another deluge of temporary buildings littered the island. Temporary barracks, utterly utilitarian and built to standard designs across the country, replaced the polo field, bringing a symbolic and actual end to the relaxed country-club atmosphere of the inter-war years.

During the war the island's primary function was as a headquarters. The headquarters building (125, later Pershing Hall) had been constructed to house this function. It was conceived by New York architect Lorimer Rich, noted for designing the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Arlington (Virginia) National Cemetery. In 1938 Fort Jay was designated headquarters of the First Army, under a reorganization in 1932 that had combined the former corps into four armies. The post was also headquarters for the Eastern Theater of Operations and the Second Service Command, entities that were established after the Pearl Harbor attack.⁶³ The mission of the Eastern Theater was to guard key industrial and transportation facilities. When the draft was established the island became the induction center for New York City, but space proved too limited and the Center was moved out in October 1942. With the buildup of personnel on the island, a new prison stockade was built along the western shoreline, but the island's importance as a prison actually diminished. Its role as part of the national system of disciplinary barracks had been terminated before the war began, and thereafter it held only minor offenders from the local garrison.⁶⁴ In some respects the mechanized war was waged on such a vast scale that it seems to have outgrown the facilities on Governors Island, so that the post had its greatest importance in the early stages of the conflict.

⁶² HABS describes it in that manner, without specifically identifying it as part of the WPA.

⁶³ These changes in military organization are probably of little interest to most people and might be more suitably presented in tabular form.

⁶⁴ There seems to be no evidence that the island was used to hold foreign prisoners, as was done on several islands in Boston Harbor. Probably Governors Island was too busy and crowded for this use to be feasible.

In October 1943 First Army headquarters was transferred to Bristol, England, to prepare for the Normandy invasion and did not return to Governors Island until June 1946. The headquarters function continued as the post's main activity during the remaining 20 years of Army occupancy. Temporary wartime organizations such as the Eastern Defense Command and the Second Service Command were discontinued. Following normal Army practice, officers rotated in and out every couple of years, so none had the enduring impact of some of the 19th Century commanders. The prison function endured to the end of Army administration, and in the years after World War II major alterations to the interior of Castle Williams to modernize the prison facilities created the existing institutional appearance.⁶⁵

A prominent feature was added on the northeast shore of Governors Island in 1950: the ventilation tower for the Brooklyn-Battery Tunnel. New York's "master builder" Robert Moses had wanted to put a bridge over the East River at that point, but that would have entailed removing Castle Clinton; and after years of seemingly hopeless struggle preservationists succeeded in saving Castle Williams' smaller sister. The Army, which had fought tenaciously to hold Governors Island for much of the 20th Century, built additional housing, mostly apartments, on the south end of the island, reinforcing the impression that it intended to remain. Instead, in 1965 the Department of Defense announced that First Army headquarters would be transferred to Fort Meade, Maryland. Cost considerations are customarily cited in base-closing decisions, but the underlying reasons often remain obscure. U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War was near its peak in 1965, and that may have been a factor.

The Coast Guard Era

The island, however, would continue its military career, and on June 30, 1966, the Coast Guard took over. Upon activation, Governors Island immediately became the largest Coast Guard base in the world. It was the headquarters of the Atlantic Area Command and several local commands, responsible for search, rescue, law enforcement, safety, marine inspection, navigation aids and civil engineering in New York harbor. In a way this represented a return to the island's earliest military use in coastal defense. Naturally, the new occupant modified the physical plant to meet its needs. Liggett Hall was transformed into a training center. In Castle Williams the prison was converted to a community center, so that the former prison shower room became used as a nursery for infants. The Coast Guard further expanded housing, most conspicuously with a high-rise apartment building in 1972, so that the island attained its greatest residential population. More than 4000 Coast Guard personnel were stationed there. With a new school, a hotel and other amenities, the island took on the characteristics of a small town. As always, it retained its anomalous relationship to the nearby metropolis. Situated on the doorstep of the city but isolated from many urban problems, life there resembled the outlying communities in Queens and Staten Island; and many former residents look back on their years on Governors Island with deep nostalgia.

⁶⁵ With good reason, the Castle Williams HSR (80) refers to its "industrial appearance."

Some notable events punctuated the routine of patrols and training. In 1973 the Coast Guard saved 64 crewmen when a container ship collided with a tanker north of the Verrazano Narrows Bridge. Thousands of military families and New York notables gathered on the island in 1976 to salute the “tall ships” parading in the harbor. President Reagan came to relight the Statue of Liberty on July 4, 1986. He must have been impressed by the setting because he returned in December 1988 to meet with Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev. The two leaders stood on Governors Island and posed with the Statue of Liberty as a backdrop. Visitors were still awed by the contrast presented by 19th Century guns aimed at the towering skyline of Manhattan, although the skyline had lost the depth and texture it retained through the 1950s, as the range of buildings was blocked by slab-like towers situated directly on the waterfront.

Despite the attractions of the site, the Coast Guard, again citing cost, announced plans to close the base in October 1995. Formal closing took place September 30, 1996, and the last caretaker detachment departed in early 2003. This departure was part of a long-term trend, already discernible when the Army left in the 1960s, that has seen a steady shift of military facilities from the Northeast to the South. During World War II the New York City area contained a number of vital installations, but by 1983, 21 of the 22 military facilities that had operated in the city during the war were gone. Defense Secretary McNamara had announced the death sentence for Brooklyn Navy Yard and Brooklyn Army Terminal at the same time as Fort Jay. In addition to possible strategic considerations, the perception that city congressmen are less supportive of the Pentagon and in any event usually have less seniority on key committees has been offered as an explanation by Kenneth Jackson.⁶⁶ The demilitarization of the Northeast and the concentration in the South is one of the defining factors in the “red state”—“blue state” divide that is now conspicuous. For Governors Island the end of more than 200 years of military occupancy was as though a venerable tree had been felled that had descended from the original forest of Nutten Island, had been a sapling in 1776, and in its rings recorded most of American military history.

⁶⁶ Kenneth T. Jackson, “The City Loses the Sword,” in Roger T. Lotchin, Martial Metropolis (Praeger, 1984).

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*The Soldier in Mexico.
(from the frontispiece in the original edition)*

The Lakeside Classics

AUTOBIOGRAPHY
OF AN
ENGLISH SOLDIER
IN THE
UNITED STATES ARMY

By George Ballentine

EDITED BY
WILLIAM H. GOETZMANN



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Having served for a considerable time in the English Army, and from which I had purchased my discharge about five years previously, I finally resolved, as a sort of last resource, to try five years in the American service. The bills advertising for recruits stated that a few enterprising young men of good character were wanted for the service of the United States; and promised good treatment as far as physical comfort was concerned, being somewhat to the following effect: That soldiers of the United States' service were provided with good quarters, an ample sufficiency of good and wholesome diet, an abundant supply of clothing, and in case of sickness, the most careful attendance, and the most skilful medical aid. The statement concluded with the amount of money which could be saved by sergeant, corporal, or private during a period of five years' service, varying from four hundred to seven hundred dollars.

It was about the middle of August, 1845, that I called at the recruiting office on Cedar street for the purpose of enlisting.¹ The sergeant in charge of the establishment, having asked me if I had been in the British service, to which I replied in the affirmative, said in that case he was afraid they could not enlist me, as they had recently received an order from

¹According to army records, Ballentine enlisted on August 12, 1845. (Register of Enlistments, Vol. 43-44, June 1840-June 1846, Old Army Records, National Archives), hereafter cited as N.A.

Washington to that effect; deserters from the British service having generally turned out bad soldiers. As I saw he was under the impression that I was a deserter, I explained that I had purchased my discharge, which I could produce if required. This, he said, altered the case. Now he would go to the recruiting officer's quarters, and if I had no objection he would take me along with him. I went with him and was soon ushered into the presence of Lieutenant Burke,⁵ a tall, handsome man with fine expressive dark eyes and large black whiskers, but a rather melancholy cast of countenance. He became Captain Burke sometime later as a consequence of the war in Mexico, which caused considerable promotion among all the officers; but he did not live to enjoy it, being killed at the battle of Churubusco, outside of the city of Mexico in August, 1847.

After asking me a few questions, he said he would be glad to have me if I passed the surgeon's examination and could prove that I had been discharged

⁵A graduate of the U.S. Military Academy, Martin J. Burke served as a recruiter until May 11, 1846, when he became adjutant, 1st Artillery. He was promoted to captain on March 3, 1847. In Mexico, he fought at Vera Cruz, Cerro Gordo, La Hoya, Contreras, and Churubusco. He was killed on August 20, 1847, while leading an assault on the fortified Churubusco convent. (George Washington Cullum, *Biographical Register of the Officers and Graduates of the U.S. Military Academy*, 3rd Edition, Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1891), hereafter cited as Cullum, and (Justin H. Smith, *The War with Mexico*, 2 volumes, New York: The MacMillan Co., 1919), hereafter cited as Justin Smith.

from the British service. I accordingly went to my lodgings and returned with my discharge certificate which he slightly glanced over, and remarking that it was quite satisfactory, directed the sergeant to go with me to the inspecting surgeon. There I underwent an examination similar to that which recruits undergo when enlisting in the British service,⁶ and immediately after, went with the sergeant to the office of a magistrate and took the oath of allegiance.

Being a soldier once more, and desirous of ascertaining the actual condition of one in the American service as soon as possible, I asked the sergeant when it would be requisite for me to go over to Governor's Island. This is a small island in Manhattan Bay where recruits are stationed until sent to join their regiments. It is somewhat more than a mile in circumference and nearly a mile from the Battery. The sergeant, who seemed a civil fellow, said that I might either go over in the garrison boat at sunset that evening, or I might defer going over until the next evening. He advised me to sell my clothes and purchase old ones in New York, as I would get almost nothing for good clothes on the island and would have no opportunity of coming over to sell them, as recruits never obtained permission to leave the island until sent to join their regiments. I followed his advice and replaced them with a light linen jacket and chip hat, which cost a mere trifle but were good enough to throw away in a day

⁶See Register of Enlistments, Old Army Records, N.A.

or two when I should put on a soldier's uniform. I also sold my trunk and a few other articles which, as a soldier, I had neither much use for nor convenient means of carrying.

At sunset, the sergeant took me and two other recruits down to the garrison boat which lay in front of Castle Garden.⁷ It was a large, handsome, and neatly painted cutter, rowed by six soldiers with a corporal acting as coxswain. Seated in the stern of the boat were a couple of young officers smoking cigars. They were probably chagrined at having been detained a minute or two, for one of them shouted in a petulant tone for us to jump in and be damned. I looked with surprise at the would-be aristocrat specimen of equal rights who had called out and could perceive that he had the apology of youth and inexperience, being little more than a boy. One of the recruits muttered loud enough to be heard by the gentleman, who stared but perhaps thought it prudent to decline a reply, "Faith and there's many a strong word comes off a weak stomach."

The evening was delightful and in a few minutes we were landed on the wharf at Governor's Island. The other two recruits and myself were shown to a tent where we were to sleep for the night. We found that it contained only two straw mattresses, and two blankets, but since the weather was very warm, we slept that night very comfortably.

⁷Castle Garden is located in the Battery in southern Manhattan. (Leon E. Seltzer, *op. cit.*)

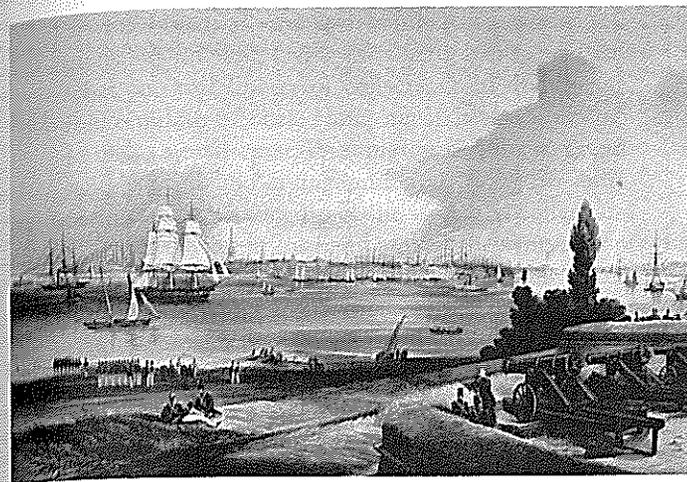
First Experiences as an American Soldier

WE WERE roused next morning by the reveille, which is always beat a little before sunrise. Having got up with the assistance of a good-natured recruit who happened to glance into our tent, we rolled up our mattresses and folded the blankets according to regulation, and then, falling into the ranks formed in front of the tents, we answered to our names as they were called by the sergeant who had charge of us. All hands were then distributed in separate parties, each party in charge of a corporal to "police" or clean round the garrison. A portion of this duty, at which the recruits grumbled loudly, and which I soon learned was one of several standing grievances of which they complained, was being sent to the barrack-square, where a unit called the permanent company was stationed. As the recruits were quartered in tents at a considerable distance from the barracks, they naturally felt indignant at the unjust degradation to which they were subjected in being compelled every morning to serve as a scavenging commission for the permanent company. The refusal to obey orders, caused by this foolish regulation, was the means of many of the recruits being confined in the guardhouse while I

was on the island. At six o'clock, we were assembled and formed into squads for drill, and then drilled until seven when we were dismissed.

At half-past seven o'clock, at beat of drum, we again fell into the ranks, having our leathern stocks on and jackets buttoned up to the collar. The roll was again called, after which we were marched on to the cookhouse for breakfast. It is a rule in the American service that soldiers shall breakfast, dine, and sup in the cookhouse, a very absurd and inconvenient regulation for which I never heard any satisfactory reason assigned. Our breakfast consisted of six ounces of bread, a slice of salt pork, and a pint of weak, unpalatable coffee, totally innocent of the useless extravagance of milk; instead of which we were permitted to season our sumptuous fare with vinegar at discretion, a large black bottle full of that condiment being placed at each end of the table.

Before commencing, and as I was about to sit down to my first breakfast on Governor's Island, a recruit, Sawney, who came from New York and one of the "bhoys" as they delight in being called, and who was a recognised and privileged wit among the recruits, volunteered to ask a blessing. It was evidently a preconcerted arrangement with several of his influential friends, who used all their address and a considerable degree of exertion to obtain silence. Having finally succeeded, Sawney rose with a face of the utmost gravity and began a profane and irreverent parody. He ended by condemning



View of Lower Manhattan from Governor's Island c. 1845.

Courtesy The New York Public Library

all those infernal scoundrels who rob the poor soldiers of their rations; amen. "Sawney, go to the guardhouse," said a sergeant who entered as this singular grace was finished. "Ay, ay," grumbled Sawney, "I expected as much; furthermore I said how it would be. If a poor devil wants to be ever so religious, it's no use a trying of it here. I suppose that's what you call liberty of conscience in this blessed free republic of ours. Hang me if it is not enough to make a man curse Washington or his old grandmother even." So saying, and swallowing his indignation along with a gulp of the wretched coffee, and taking his bread in his hand amidst the sympathy of his admiring friends, he walked off to the guardhouse muttering curses, not loud but deep.

After breakfast, the sergeant in charge of the recruits took me and the two others who came over on the previous evening to the clothing store, where we received the following articles of clothing: a forage cap, leathern stock, jacket, and trousers of coarse blue cloth, two cotton shirts, two pairs of socks, one pair of half boots, a blanket, a greatcoat, a knapsack, and a havresack. Having brushed our clothes, cleaned the metal buttons of our jackets, and polished our boots, at ten o'clock, we again fell into ranks for inspection and drill. After a careful inspection by the officer in charge to see that we were smart and clean in our appearance, we were formed into a number of separate squads for drill. Those who had joined earliest, and consequently

were the most forward with their drill, were placed in the first squad, and so on in succession. The other two recruits, Murphy and Finnegan, and myself, were turned over to a corporal named Bright to be taught the steps of a soldier's drill and the manner in which a soldier should stand in the ranks.

Corporal Bright, an Irishman by birth, was a United States soldier by profession and long custom. He had served three enlistments and entered on the fourth. He was a stout, paunchy little fellow, rather round-shouldered, slightly bowlegged, nose carbuncled, and portending an addiction to strong potations. In addition, he had a very decided squint from a pair of dull, grey, and glassy-looking orbs, which, as Finnegan when criticising his personal appearance remarked, "stuck out of the crathur's head like the eyes of a boiled codfish." Notwithstanding these slight drawbacks, Corporal Bright had an idea that he was a very handsome and well-made man, and on this account became the unconscious butt of all the recruits he got to drill. "Murphy, arrah bad luck to you for an awkward-looking omadhaun,"¹ he would shout out, "can't you hold up your big head, and look me straight in the eyes?" (Murphy aside) "Be the hokey, my bright-looking customer, and that's what I defy mortal man to do." (Corporal Bright marching in front), "Look at me now Mur-

¹An Irish term of abuse meaning fool. (Compact edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), hereafter cited as O.E.D.

phy, and yourself too, Finnegan; there now, do yez iver see me duck my head like a gandher going under a gate or bent two double like some old Judy² going to a wake?" (Finnegan aside) "Faith, an it's a Judy you make of yourself, sure enough, you consated crathur." (Corporal Bright now addressing his squad), "Be my sowl, I'm ashamed of yez for counthrymen; *stand at ease*; I'll just march a few paces in front now to show yez how yez ought to march; now if yez plase will yez take a pattrern." So saying, he would step off and march twenty or thirty paces to the front with such a ludicrous imitation of the *beau ideal* graceful ease as to sometimes prove rather too much for the gravity of his pupils. These performances he would intersperse with a few instructions and self-laudatory remarks, such as, "There now, do yez persave the difference? Can't yez carry yer shoulders back, yer heads ereck, and march as you persave I do, as bould as a lion, and as straight as a ramrod?" (Finnegan aside) "Arrah, look at the gommagh³ with the airs and consate of him, marching in front there as bould as Julius Cæsar; sure it's a holy show the unfortunate crather makes ov himself with his 'straight as a ramrod,' faith, the ramrod

²Judy, the name of the wife of Punch, was used in the mid-nineteenth century to refer to a woman of ridiculous appearance. (James Murray, ed., *A New English Dictionary*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1888-1928), hereafter cited as N.E.D.

³A variant on gom, an Irish word meaning poor, silly fellow. (O.E.D., op. cit.)

that's no straighter than you, would do to load the gun that shoots round the corner. (Murphy aside in reply), "Faix, but it is the beautiful cook they spoiled when they made the same fellow a corporal; he could have one eye up the chimney and the other in the pot at the same time." Such is a faint sketch of Corporal Bright and his squad of recruits on the drill ground at Governor's Island.

Having been well drilled while serving in the British Army I found no difficulty in acquiring the drill on the island; the systems of English and American drill being essentially the same. I, therefore, escaped a good amount of that annoyance to which recruits are often subject upon first joining the army, and which frequently proceeds from the ignorance or bad temper of the noncommissioned officer appointed to drill them. The proper combination of intelligence, firmness, and mildness of manner requisite to form a good drill instructor is of rare occurrence, and owing to this cause, many a young and high-spirited recruit, discouraged and fretted by the bullying and blustering tone of those who ought to be his patient instructors, is tempted to desert the service when, with proper treatment, he might have become a good soldier.

At half-past eleven o'clock the squads were dismissed and the greater part of the recruits who possessed money, or had credit at the sutler's store, went over to it to buy crackers and cheese, pies and other eatables, and to drink cider, ginger, and root

beer, all of which were sold there at the slight advance of one hundred percent upon the price at which similar commodities could be purchased in New York.

The sutler's store is a shop kept in every garrison and is somewhat similar to a canteen in the British service, only the sutlers' stores are prohibited from selling spirits. Recruits, on arriving at the island, were allowed credit in the sutler's store to the amount of two dollars, which sum, or the amount taken by the recruit, was remitted by the captain of his company on the first payday after he joined his regiment. Those recruits who had exhausted their credit at the store, either went to their tents or lay stretched on the grass under the fine, shady trees that ornamented the parade ground, reading, dozing or smoking, and chatting according to their various inclinations.

At twelve o'clock the dinner call beat, a fifer and drummer playing the regulation tune, "O the Roast Beef of Old England." We again fell into the ranks, buttoned up as at breakfast roll call, and having answered our names were marched to the cookhouse to dinner. This meal consisted of six ounces of bread, a slice of salt pork, and a basin of bean soup. This compound was very salty and very fat and contained a quantity of half-boiled beans. I have seen some strange and rather uninviting dishes both before and since, but never anything so utterly unpalatable as the bean soup of Governor's Island. A

few of the more verdant of the recruits occasionally swallowed a portion of it under the false impression that it was a species of military soup which might possess some hidden nutritious virtues, though so singularly uninviting in taste and appearance. For this venial error, however, they were pretty certain to suffer a moderate degree of penance until led by experience to see their mistake. The old and more experienced hands usually preferred to wash down their dry victuals with a drink of water so that the quantity of Spartan broth and salt pork left on the dinner table of the recruits was quite enormous, a fact easily cited to refute any complaint of an insufficient dietary.

At three o'clock, we again fell in for drill and were dismissed at half-past four; and at five o'clock we were marched, as before, to the cookhouse for supper, which consisted of six ounces of bread and a pint of coffee. I need not insist upon the inadequacy of the diet furnished to the recruit both as regards quantity and quality at Governor's Island, where a complete organisation seems to exist for the purpose of robbing the recruit and disgusting him with the service at the very outset. The diet and general treatment are much better when the soldier joins his company; although I am free to confess that, throughout the service generally, a very wide field still remains for improvement. I am aware that it will seem to many a thing quite incredible that in a country abounding as America does with cheap

food, a standard grievance with the soldiers should be the manner in which they are fed; it is a fact, nevertheless, quite notorious to every soldier who has ever served in the American Army.

After supper, we usually had an interval of rest until nine o'clock. Now came in the "sweet of the night," while the old and sedate portion of the recruits strolled along the footwalks that intersect and surround the island or sat in small parties conversing in front of their tents, the younger and more volatile among them engaged in a variety of pastimes and amusements. Football, leaping, throwing the stone, wrestling, footracing, leapfrog, or dancing when music could be procured were a few of the more prominent diversions commonly resorted to.

Then, later on in the evening, after having answered our names at retreat, which was beat precisely at sunset, groups assembled round the tent doors to smoke, chat, tell tales, or sing songs. Negro songs or the broadly humorous formed the basis of these social entertainments except with the German portion of the recruits who, having been taught to sing in their national schools, had acquired a more refined ear and a taste for music of a rather superior quality. They generally arranged, therefore, a separate party, forming a very pleasing concert among themselves by singing their national songs; these, when heard from a distance had a very beautiful and harmonious effect. At nine o'clock, the drums and fifes played a few merry tunes, after which the

roll was called and we were then dismissed to bed. About fifteen minutes were then allowed to elapse when the drummer beat three distinct taps on the drum. Then at this signal every light in tents or quarters had to be extinguished and the most strict silence preserved on pain of the offender being sent to the guardhouse—the immediate punishment for all wilful infractions of the rules of the service. Such is a summary of one day, and with but slight variations, of every day during the three weeks I spent on Governor's Island.⁴

I had been upon the island about a week when a large draft of recruits was ordered to Texas, where they were to join different regiments preparing for that expedition to the frontier which resulted in involving the United States in the war with Mexico. The popular feeling in the United States at that period seemed to be strongly in favor of a war. Texas had just been annexed and the papers teemed with paragraphs calculated to rouse the war spirit, dwelling on the indignities offered to the States by the Mexican government; especially in refusing to pay certain indemnities claimed by American citizens

⁴Wouter Van Twiller purchased Governor's Island from Indians in 1637. Its name refers to its long use as the home of colonial governors. Troops were first posted there in 1755 by the British. In 1794 Congress provided for the erection of Fort Jay on the island. (*Encyclopedia Americana*, Danbury, Conn., Grolier International, 1984). First Artillery records indicate that Ballentine joined Company I on August 26, actually two weeks after enlisting. See Returns from 1st Artillery Regiment, August, 1845, Old Army Records, N.A.

for injuries received by them from Mexican civil functionaries in their trading relations with that nation. In the meantime the refusal of Mexico to recognize the independence of Texas or to listen to any statement of American grievances, with the circumstance of her stationing an army on the Rio Grande, showed that she was careless how she provoked the coming struggle, which she probably now began to consider inevitable; and tended to show that hostilities would soon break out between the sister republics.

I cannot say how far the near prospect of a war may have operated upon the minds of recruits to cause desertion, but certainly the number of desertions at the period I speak of was very great. This crime, I had imagined, would be almost unknown or of very rare occurrence in this army, where the period of service was limited to five years and which professed to treat its soldiers so liberally on all other points. But the practice of putting all recruits who join at Governor's Island during the summer months into tents, where they are roasted as if in an oven during the day, and frequently drenched with wet and starved with cold during the night, must produce a degree of disgust to the service in the mind of the recruit at the very outset. For a tent, though excellent accommodation to the soldier on a campaign, is a miserable substitute for a substantial barracks. And it certainly must produce a rather unpleasant impression on the recruit to reflect that

probably the most miserable loafer in New York is in a more comfortable lodging than himself. It is to this practice, together with the confinement to the island and the wretched system that prevails in regard to their food, that so much of the desertion among the recruits should be attributed. In fact, throughout the American service generally, desertion, though the only offence for which the disgraceful punishment of flogging is permitted, is not looked upon in the light of a crime by the soldier. This is principally owing to the conviction that they are not treated justly. No great amount of logic is required to perceive that a contract to be binding must bind both parties; but it would take a good deal to convince the soldier that he is bound to observe an oath which he has taken under conditions which he finds are not observed.

The common method adopted by the recruits who wished to desert from Governor's Island was to engage a boat to come over in the nighttime to take them off, while others trusted themselves and their fortunes to a single plank in the following manner: Watching when the tide was setting into the harbour, they fastened their clothes to a plank, and by swimming and holding on to it while they directed its course with the assistance of the tide, they easily reached New York or Brooklyn. One morning we missed two large tubs which we had made by sawing a hogshead in two and which always stood at the pump, being used as washtubs by the recruits who

were under the necessity of laundering their own linen. There were various conjectures regarding the missing utensils until someone suggested the probability of their having been used to ferry over the two recruits who were reported absent that morning. This surmise was soon confirmed by one of the permanent company who had been in New York the previous night and who stated that he had seen two small strange-looking craft, answering to our description of the missing tubs, paddling in the grey twilight of the morning, alongside one of the wharfs in New York, where there is little doubt that their adventurous navigators effected a safe landing.

A rather ludicrous circumstance happened to a captain of a schooner who picked up one of these deserters in the bay. The deserter had left Governor's Island on a plank, and having miscalculated the run of the tide, he was rapidly drifting out to sea when he was seen and picked up by the schooner. It would seem, however, that the poor fellow had only escaped one danger to run into another, for the captain on questioning him and finding that he was a deserter, not being of those who think that a good action is its own reward, resolved upon obtaining the more tangible one of thirty dollars, the sum paid for the apprehension of a deserter, by delivering him up to the authorities as soon as they should arrive at New York. However, he concealed his design from his intended victim to whom he appeared exceedingly kind and attentive, giving him a

good stiff glass of grog and some dry clothes to wear until his own were dried. On arriving at the wharf he told him that he had business ashore and recommended him to stay where he was until evening, as there was danger of his being apprehended during daylight. So saying and locking the cabin door, he went off to Governor's Island to procure a party of soldiers for his apprehension.

Meanwhile the deserter was not idle or asleep and having "smelt a rat" from the captain's manner, especially from the circumstance of his having locked the cabin door, he resolved to turn the tables upon him. The result of this resolution was, that on the return of the captain with a party of soldiers, he found that not only had he lost his trouble, but that during his absence his chest had been broken open, and a considerable sum of money, together with a valuable silver lever watch, had been abstracted by the miserable-looking wretch on whom he had calculated on receiving thirty dollars. The captain, who looked extremely foolish, had evidently caught a Tartar instead of a deserter, being minus sixty instead of plus thirty dollars, and in place of receiving sympathy was laughed at by all who heard the story. What added flavour to the jest among the recruits, was the curious, half-witted, and simple looks of the deserter, who was generally considered deficient in intellect, but who clearly proved himself more of a rogue than fool upon this occasion.

In order to check on the frequency of desertion, great efforts were made to apprehend some of the soldiers in the act of escaping from the island for the purpose of inflicting a punishment that might deter others from following in their example. At length, having succeeded in apprehending the two who were trying to cross in a tiny boat to Brooklyn, the commanding officer immediately caused a court martial to be summoned for their trial; and after the lapse of a few days during which the proceedings of the court were sent to the commander-in-chief for his approval, the prisoners were brought out on parade to receive sentence and punishment. Both of them having been proved guilty of the crime of desertion were sentenced to "undergo the infliction of a corporal punishment of fifty lashes on the bare back with a raw cowhide, and further to have their heads shaved and be drummed out of the service with ignominy."

They were young and good-looking men, one of them a native of the States, the other a German, and both received their punishment, which was inhumanly severe, with admirable fortitude. A number of the recruits were compelled to fall out of the ranks and go to the rear, owing to a sensation of faintness caused by witnessing this exhibition of modern torture. This is a common occurrence with younger men, both officers and soldiers, many of whom seem to suffer nearly as much as the recipient, at witnessing these barbarous punishments for

the first time. Fifty lashes is the full extent of corporal punishment that can be inflicted in the American Army and that only for the crime of desertion; but as far as physical suffering is concerned, or the damage done to the constitution by that inhuman mode of punishment, fifty lashes with a cowhide are fully equivalent to three hundred with a cat, such as is used in the British Army.

After being flogged, the prisoners were marched back to the guardhouse, where they had their heads shaved bare, in accordance with their sentencing. Next morning they were brought to the parade ground under the charge of a file of the guard, and marched from thence round the garrison, a fifer and drummer playing a tune specially used on these occasions called the "Rogues' March," being the same tune used in the British service on a like occasion. They were then marched down to the wharf and sent over in the garrison boat to New York.

A subscription was secretly got up and several dollars collected for them among the recruits, by whom their condition was generally commiserated, though some of them did not hesitate to say that they considered them lucky fellows, and had better be flogged and drummed out than shot up in Texas or Mexico.

Governors Island

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Governors Island
National Monument



A Do-It-Yourself Walking Tour

Welcome to Governors Island! This self-guided tour will help you explore some of the wonderful places on the island. All of the stops on the tour are in bold and correspond to the building numbers on the map.



Building 140 was originally part of the New York Arsenal.

Tour begins at **Building 148**, the ferry waiting room, which has restrooms and vending machines with water, soft drinks and snacks.

Across the street is **Building 140**, the **National Park Service visitor information center and bookstore**, with books about the history of New York City, its harbor and the military eras connected with Governors Island. National Park Service rangers and volunteers can help answer questions. Please fill out a comment sheet and, if you're an island "alumnus," share your experiences about living here.

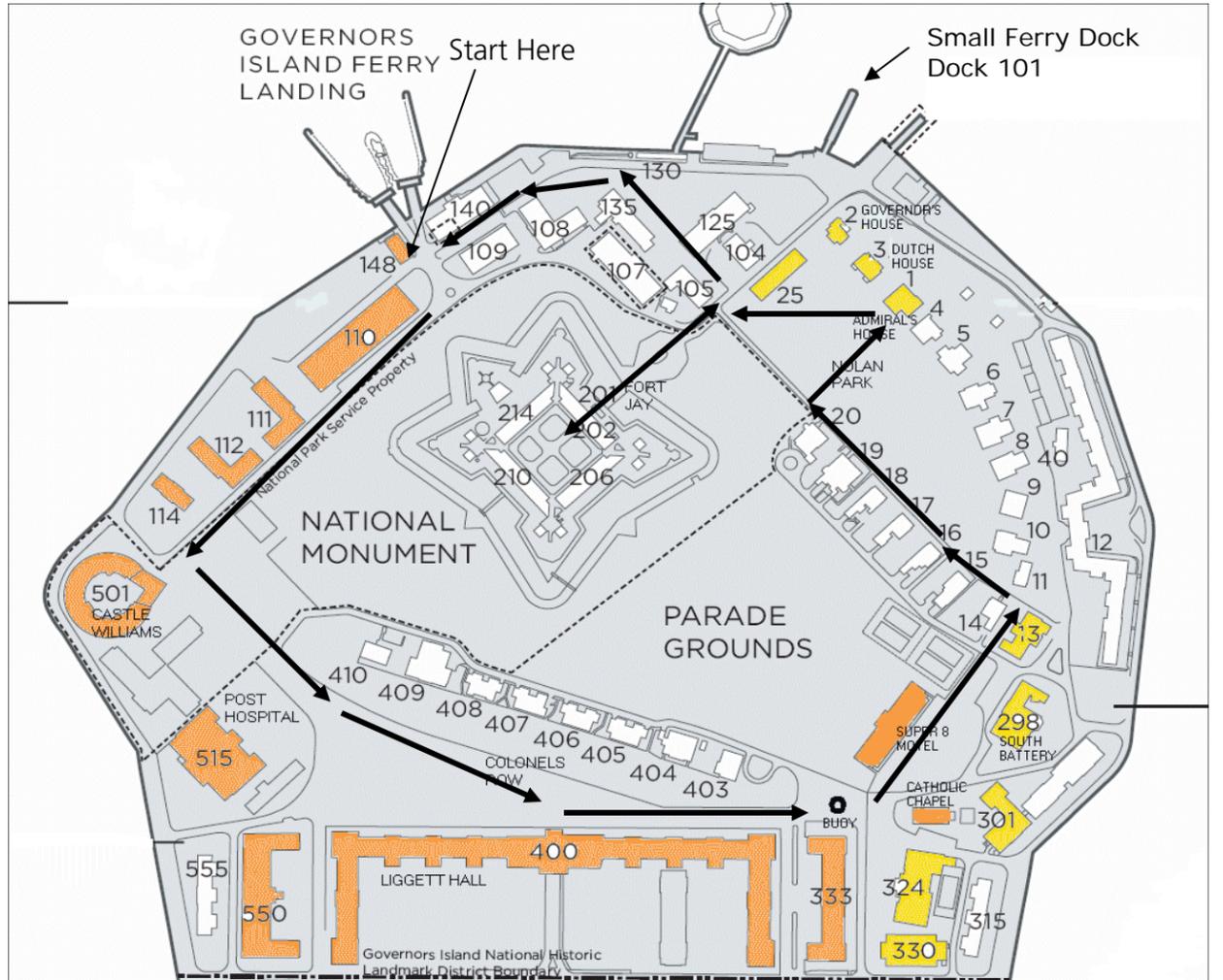
Charge up the hill to the cannon surrounded by flowers.

Turn right at the cannon onto Andes Road and walk past the long brick **Building 110**. It is the last and largest in a series of warehouses constructed for the New York Arsenal, located here from 1833 to 1920. Because of its location, Governors Island was strategically important in the defense of New York Harbor. It was a key distribution center for arms and ammunition for other army posts up and down the Atlantic Coast, and the island arsenal was always prepared to supply a military post in time of need. The arsenal was run by the Army's Ordnance Department, with its own commanding general, making it an military post within a military post. After the arsenal left the island, Building 110 became the island's "city hall," with administrative offices for the Army post and Coast Guard base. Today there is a design competition exhibit about the new park proposed for the south end of the island. Check it out.

Between Buildings 110 and 111 is a **stone with a bronze plaque** that commemorates the namesake of Andes Road. Most of the streets on the island are named after those who died during combat in World War I 1917-1918. The 16th Infantry Regiment was one of the first regiments sent to France in 1917. When they made Governors Island their home from 1920 to 1940, they provided many of the island's place names. Look for other plaques along the way.

Buildings 111, 112 and 114 are examples of 1930s-era residential construction on the island. The two L-shaped Georgian Revival buildings were homes to the families of mid-ranking Army officers. Just few yards from the hospital, Building 114 served as nurses' quarters.

All three of these buildings were designed by Rogers & Poor in 1934, a New York City architectural firm that designed the Wright Brothers Memorial at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina.



The interior of Castle Williams, 2004.

Castle Williams is one of the best remaining examples of an early American designed coastal fortification. Constructed between 1807-1811, Castle Williams was used to defend the harbor, as a recruit barracks, and temporary prisoner of war holding facility for Confederate soldiers during the Civil War in 1862. It was an Army disciplinary barracks until 1965.



In the "baby boom" of the years after World War II, the post hospital was a busy place.

Building 515 was the post hospital, designed in 1935 by McKim, Mead and White, one of New York City's most famous architectural firms.

Continuing along Hay Road, stroll past **Colonel's Row**. Historically known as "**Brick Row**," these houses were constructed between 1893 and 1917 as an effort to improve the quality of housing for Army

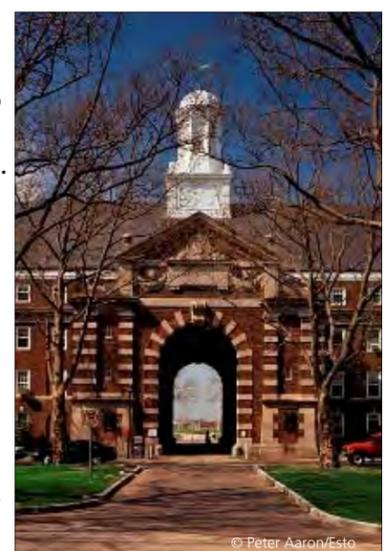


Interior of Quarters 403 on Brick Row, 1995.

officers and their families. Other older army posts have the same style of brick officers' residences. Brick Row was waterfront property until the area across Hay Road was filled by dirt and rocks removed from Lexington Avenue subway line between City Hall and Grand Central Terminal in the early 1900s. The landfill increased the size of the island from 70 to 172 acres.

Building 400, Liggett Hall, named for General Hunter Liggett, was the first structure built during a wave of new construction in 1929 that replaced deteriorating temporary wood barracks left over from World War I. In 1902, Secretary of War Elihu Root, a New Yorker, asked McKim, Mead and White to draw up a new master plan for the newly enlarged island. He went against War Department staff who sought to demolish Fort Jay and Castle Williams. Root wanted to keep the old forts and tear down everything else. In the end neither plan was carried out.

During the planning for Liggett Hall, then congressman and later New York mayor, Fiorello LaGuardia, began to push for an airport in New York City, viewing the newly enlarged Governors



Archway of Liggett Hall, 1995.

Island as the perfect spot for a that airport. LaGuardia Airport did get built – but it’s in Queens!

Building 333 serves as one of the “book ends” with Building 550 to the massive Liggett Hall. Building 333 served as housing for a Women’s Army Corps unit.

The **navigation buoy**, was an island landmark and a centerpiece of many family holiday cards during the Coast Guard years when the island was



The “Buoy” and Our Lady of the Sea Chapel.

not only the largest Coast Guard base in the world, but a self-contained small town, and home in 1990 to 3000 people and another 2000 daily commuters.

From the navigation buoy, you can see many of the buildings that constituted this “small town.”

Building 309, the white wooden military-style chapel built in 1942, is **Our Lady Star of the Sea Chapel**, the island’s Roman Catholic church.

To the right of the chapel is the white columned **Building 324**, the **Fort Jay YMCA**. Built in 1926, it provided a social and recreation center for soldiers

stationed a long way from home and its stage hosted school plays and community musicals.

Next door, at the end of the street is the **post theater**, **Building 330**. Built in 1939, it seats 700 people. In 1950, you could see first run movies here for 18 cents.

Veer left across the parking lot to the original **South Battery**, **Building 298**, with its massive sandstone foundation. Its history is that of the island –



The South Battery as the officers club, 1995.

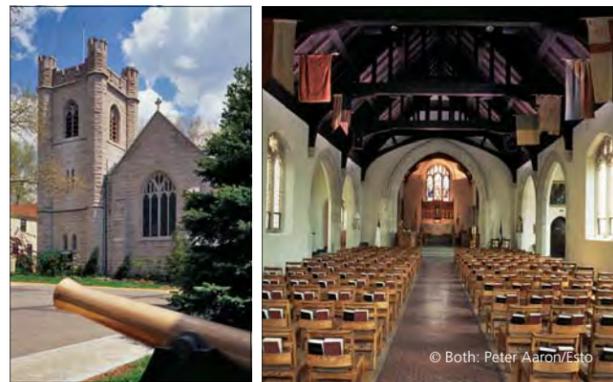
adaptation to the changing needs of the U.S. Army. Built in 1812, South Battery defended against enemy ships entering Buttermilk Channel and worked with the other forts on Governors Island, Liberty and Ellis Islands as part of a harbor defense system. South Battery was also known as Half-Moon Battery because of its shape. It had a tier of mounted guns and a one-story barracks that is the front of the building. By the 1830’s the battery housed the “Music Boys,” students of the School of Practice for Army musicians.

By 1863 a second story was added to the barracks to house non-commissioned officers. In 1878 it was converted to officers’ mess and Catholic chapel. In

the 1880’s a courts martial hall were added. By 1904 the building became an amusement hall and lecture room for enlisted men. In 1930’s and again in the 1950’s the building was renovated for use as the officers club.

Building 293, a former **Super 8 motel**, (1986) is one of the few non-historic buildings on this part of the island. It replaced a 1880s era guest house that sat on the same site and served visitors to the Coast Guard base.

The gray stone **Building 13** is the **Chapel of St. Cornelius the Centurion**. In 1844 Rev. John McVickar, an Episcopal priest from Trinity Church



St. Cornelius interior and exterior in 1996.

on Wall Street, took it on himself to serve as Governors Island’s chaplain. He helped construct a wooden chapel in 1847, where the tennis courts are today. The present church was completed in 1906. Follow the sidewalk by the bell tower, pass the church and turn left where you enter into the officers’ housing area known as **Nolan Park**. Named for General Dennis E. Nolan, former commander of the Second Corps and First Army on Governors Island in the 1930s, this “neighborhood” encompasses the oldest residential buildings on the



Officer residences in Nolan Park.

island. The yellow houses around the park were built between 1854 and 1902 as single or double family officers’ quarters. The houses are in a standard vernacular style as specified by U.S. Army Quartermaster plans, with spacious interiors and open porches. At the northern end of Nolan Park sit a number of prominent brick buildings.

Quarters 1, the **Admiral’s or Commanding Officer’s Quarters**, was constructed in 1843 according to the plans of Martin E. Thompson, a leading New York architect. The house was assigned to the highest ranking officer on the post. It was the home of General Winfield Scott Hancock during his run for president in 1880. It was also the home of General Jonathan Wainwright who witnessed and signed the Japanese surrender ending World War II. and General Walter “Beetle” Smith, who accepted the surrender of Germany for General Dwight D. Eisenhower and signed the document on May 7, 1945.

. The last building in the row is the **Governor’s House**, **Quarters 2**. Long rumored to be an early



Quarters 1, Admiral’s or Commanding Officer’s house, 1984.



Quarters 2, the “Governor’s House” in 1984.

18th century construction for the British Royal Governor, this building was really built about 1813. The building has undergone numerous practical and cosmetic alterations. It was originally constructed to be the post’s main guard house, but was subsequently used to house the post’s commanding officer, a purpose for which it was remodeled in 1824. When the Admiral’s House was built in 1843, the Governor’s House probably returned to use as a guard house and, at times, the headquarters of various commands. In 1922 the building was returned to use as a residence.



A bird’s eye view of Fort Jay, the ferry in the background, 1984.

The oldest structure on Governors Island is **Fort Jay**. The walls and gate of the fort were rebuilt in 1806 to replace a series of earthen forts built in 1776 and 1794. The gate dates to 1796, the walls to 1806 and the barracks on the inside the fort to 1834. The barracks were first as officers housing, then family housing from the 1930s to 1996. The cannons at either side of the gate date to the Civil War, about 1864. Enter into the fort, then turn around going back to Building 105 across from the entrance to Nolan Park and turn left.



Building 105

Building 125—Pershing Hall

The former headquarters building for the First Army and the Coast Guard Atlantic Area Command. It has murals about American military history from the American Revolution through World War I.

Continue along the sidewalk behind Building 105 to a small triangular yard and...

Quarters 135—Arsenal Commander’s House

The home for the commanding officer of the New York Arsenal from

1833 to 1920. Its front yard view has one of the most spectacular views of lower Manhattan. Go down the steps and turn left on to the road and follow it to where you started your tour.



Quarters 135—Arsenal Commander’s residence



The Key To The Continent: New York and the American Revolution



Plan of New York and Staten Islands with part of Long Island. Governors Island is circled. *Library of Congress.*



Battle of the "Rose" and "Phoenix" with the American fire ships, 1776.

George Washington arrived in New York in April 1776 with the nearly impossible task of protecting the city and its vast waterways from British attack and invasion, with a poorly trained and equipped army against 400 ships and 40,000 British soldiers and sailors.



In the end, he confronted superior forces, held his army together and saved it as to fight another day.

New York City was of great interest to both the British and the American Colonists in the early days of the Revolutionary War due its central location and safe harbor. The city's importance resulted in the "Battle of Brooklyn", the largest battle of the American Revolution.

The Importance of New York

The natural harbor of New York carved by glaciers 20,000 years ago made an ideal safe haven. The Dutch and eventually the British utilized the naturally sheltered harbor for a center of trade and commerce that would grow in importance and was the central focus of the British Colonies. During the French-Indian War (Seven Years War) from 1756 to 1763, New York became so prosperous from war contracts that Great Britain's government decided to tax the colonies to finance war debts. Americans resisted the tax laws fiercely and sometimes violently. Events such as the Boston Massacre and the Boston Tea Party led to the first shots of the Revolutionary War fired at Lexington and Concord in 1775.

The first military campaigns of the war were centered in the Boston area, but with General George Washington's victory at Dorchester Heights, Massachusetts in March of 1776 and the British evacuation of Boston, steps were taken to fortify other important sites in the colonies. With the British fleet at large after its retreat from Boston, Washington knew it was only a matter of time before British General Howe and his brother Admiral Howe set their sights on New York. Early in 1776 John Adams described New York as "a kind of key to the whole continent". Both Washington and British officers General and Admiral Howe were aware of the importance of the city. The British wanted New York as the base to launch all their operations during the Revolutionary War. Its central location and multiple waterways would make it easy to launch attacks on both the northern and southern colonies from the same post. General Washington wanted to keep the city out of British hands for the same reason.

Fortification of the city began in February 1776 under the direction of Major General Charles Lee. It was felt that the city had too many surrounding waterways, making it impossible to completely defend, so Manhattan would be fortified with gun emplacements and roadblocks instead of concentrating fortifications at the Narrows and other strategic places in the harbor. Fortifications would eventually be constructed across the East River on Brooklyn Heights, Gowanus Heights (a string of hills that run south of Brooklyn Heights) and Governors Island.

Governors Island – The Best Fortified Site in the Harbor

Governors Island was seen as an ideal place to defend the upper harbor because of its central location. General Israel Putnam, a hero of the Battle of Bunker Hill, oversaw the fortification of the island. In May General Washington remarked that "Governor's Island has a large and strong work erected and a Regiment encamped there." Earthworks were set up on the high point of the island, approximately where Fort Jay stands today.

The defenses were first put to the test when the British reached the harbor. On July 12 the HMS *Phoenix* and *Rose*, along with two tenders and *Tryal*, a schooner, sailed up the harbor to test colonial defenses. The cannons on Governors Island, Red Hook, and Manhattan fired at the ships – they escaped, but not without damage. After the altercation, the works on Governors Island were strengthened until it was considered the strongest colonial post.

As 400 British ships with 40,000 soldiers and sailors slowly entered New York harbor during the summer of 1776, turning the harbor into a forest of ship masts and converting Staten Island into one large military base, George Washington and his army nervously watched and waited.



Left: "George Washington evacuates troops from Brooklyn, August 27, 1776." Over 9,500 soldiers escaped across the East River to Manhattan in a single night. Right: "The Burning of New York." Just as the British were taking New York, a fire broke out destroying the area west of Broadway. The city's fire companies had either left town or were fighting with George Washington. *Library of Congress.*

The Battle of Long Island and Governors Island

British forces landed in Brooklyn to stage a siege of New York on August 22. The sparsely guarded Jamaica Pass of Gowanus Heights proved to be the Americans' defensive downfall as British General Clinton seized the pass on the morning of August 27. With the defenses at Gowanus Heights breached, the British forced the 9,500 Americans to retreat to Brooklyn Heights and backing them up against the East River, near the location of the Brooklyn Bridge at the Fulton ferry landing.

Under cover of darkness, using a fleet of small fishing boats, Washington evacuated his men across the East River to Manhattan, while forces on Governors Island deterred the British Navy from patrolling the river during the Continental Army's escape. The men on the island were among the last to retreat. About 7 AM, the island came under fire from the British. According to a Hessian soldier who witnessed the events, two of the boats sank on the way to Manhattan and approximately forty men perished. Those soldiers played an key role in the continued survival of Washington's Continental Army, allowing it to continue the fight for American independence.

British Occupation of New York

George Washington was eventually forced to retreat out of the city entirely, leaving New York to be occupied by the British for the rest of the war. The importance of New York was not forgotten by Washington, as he tried several times to retake the city for the remainder of the war. All attempts were unsuccessful. Manhattan was occupied for seven years.

The city under British occupation was not a pleasant place for patriots to be. The influx of thousands of British troops, loyalist refugees and the loss of much of the city to a fire just before the battle made Manhattan extremely crowded. As the war progressed, conditions in New York steadily worsened. Supplies became scarce, making life hard even for the wealthy. Tens of thousands of American prisoners were kept in prison ships in the East River. These ships were horrible places where prisoners were routinely abused and neglected resulting in the deaths of over 10,000 Americans, more than those that died on all of the battlefields of the war combined. These unsung prisoners of war were later buried in monuments at Fort Greene in Brooklyn and at Trinity Church in Manhattan.

Governors Island was also occupied by the British and bore witness to the conditions in the harbor during the rest of the war. The island was garrisoned by British troops who repaired the Americans' fortifications and added buildings of their own. An inventory of buildings on the island from 1783 lists fifteen structures, including wells, a guard house, a barn and a hospital. No traces of those buildings remain today.

The Beginnings of a New Nation

The British cause would be dealt a fatal blow with the defeat at Yorktown, Virginia in 1781. While the war ended in 1781, it was not until 1783, that the British finally departed in the United States after the war ended. Peace talks began in Paris in 1782, and a peace treaty was finally signed on September 3, 1783, marking the official end of the Revolutionary War. The British did not evacuate New York until November 25, abandoning their last bastion in the colonies. A few hours later Washington's forces returned to New York, tracing his retreat route from 1776. November 25 was regularly celebrated in New York as "Evacuation Day". After re-entering New York, George Washington gave his farewell address to his men in the Long Room of Fraunces Tavern in lower Manhattan and a central meeting place in eighteenth century New York.



Washington Entering New York, 1783. *Fraunces Tavern Museum*

Governors Island

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National Monument
New York



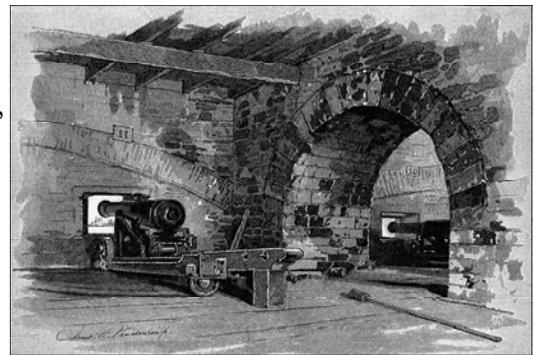
Prisoners on the Island



A pre-World War I postcard depicting Castle Williams' courtyard prior to the addition of the concrete-enclosed catwalks that currently dominate the Castle's interior walls

Changing Times and Changing Needs

Fort Jay and Castle Williams, both constructed in the early 19th century to protect New York Harbor, did their jobs without ever firing a shot during the War of 1812—the British never entered the Harbor during that conflict. They were both admirable fortifications, and, especially in the case of Castle Williams, would create a new standard for coastal defense structures. However, changing technology allowing weapons to fire farther and more accurately forever changed Governors Island's role by the 1840s in the defense of New York City and the nation. Governors Island, come the mid-1800s, would no longer be used primarily for the defense of New York Harbor as it had been for decades before. The army would find other uses for it.



Castle Williams' bombproof casemates, once used to house over 100 cannon in total, would serve several purposes over their military careers *Library of Congress*

A Question of Rank

By the summer of 1861, as both the Union and the Confederacy found the ongoing Civil War to be dragging on much longer than they expected, compelling both governments to deal with the inevitable collection of prisoners they were assembling. Neither side was prepared to deal with the tremendous number of captives they amassed, and over the course of the war both sides collectively established 150 makeshift, improvised prisons constructed out of everything from simple fences around swampland to abandoned warehouses. The US Army, scrambling to find lodgings for captured Southerners, turned to forts along the Atlantic coast, including old Fort Jay and Castle Williams. Captured officers were sent to the northern barracks of Fort Jay, while interred enlisted men were crammed into the old artillery casemates of Castle Williams, now sealed and barred off into individual cells.

Officers kept in the barracks at Fort Jay were well taken care of. Their lodgings were snug but comfortable, they were allowed to stroll most of the island at their leisure, they were permitted to write home to their friends and families, and they occasionally played baseball in the fort's parade grounds. In general, officers on both sides respected each other and treated each other as gentlemen.

Captured enlisted men kept in Castle Williams have a very different experience, however: while frequently the Castle was kept well below capacity (at one point as few as five prisoners), during at least two periods throughout the war it peaked at well over 1,000 men crammed into the cells. With many inmates per cell and no heating, running water, or beds—the structure had been built, after all, to house cannon, not people—conditions at the Castle were squalid. Disease was rampant: cholera, typhoid, and measles all were frequent killers, and the frequent vomiting induced by water-borne diseases made summertime inmates especially miserable when the Castle was kept full. While those captured early in the war were occasionally given outdoor time, by the end of the war, all those interred within the walls of Castle Williams were confined to their cells twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. These conditions mirrored those found in prisons throughout the South.



Lieutenant Alonzo Bell poses for the camera prior to his capture at Fort Hatteras *Alex Leary*

Lieutenant Alonzo Etheridge Bell of the North Carolina Volunteers spent a few months in 1861 as a prisoner in the barracks at Fort Jay. He writes at length about the prisoner's life on Governors Island, particularly discussing the calm, comfortable climate in the

officers' quarters, the pervasive boredom, and the constant funerals that all on the island attended for the enlisted men in Castle Williams. Bell's spirits are clearly affected by the grim routine of a funeral every few days, though his status as an officer allowed him some separation from the worst conditions on the island.

Other Civil War-era prisons make Castle Williams look tame, however: prisons both North and South at places like Elmira, New York and, most famously, Andersonville, Georgia had death tolls numbering in the thousands. Camp Sumter at Andersonville consisted of nothing more than fenced-off swamps in which hundreds of men were thrown and told to create shelter out of whatever materials they could find. The prisoners had to contend with pervasive disease and malnutrition along with greedy prison gangs, who would beat and even kill other prisoners for their food and shelter. Vigilante justice became common at these prisons—entire trials would be held for captured gang members, ending frequently in punishments that included running the gauntlet and even execution by hanging. Compared to these prisons, Castle Williams was at least somewhat more humane to its inmates.



A Confederate prisoner sits in a Union prison camp, his captors standing guard behind him *National Park Service*

The Post-War Prison

Following the Civil War, the US Army vastly improved the facilities at Castle Williams, adding insulation, heating, running water, and, eventually, electricity. It was designated a US Army Prison in 1895 and was made a branch of the Fort Leavenworth Disciplinary Barracks in 1915, of which the prison facility at Alcatraz in San Francisco was also a branch. Castle Williams held mostly low-grade offenders, serving sentences of less than one year in a distinctly low-security environment.

The Castle developed a reputation for being the most desirable location in the US Army prison system, and while the outstanding view from the fort and the friendly nature of the guards helped that reputation, the foremost cause was the shortage of hard labor to be performed on Governors Island—at Alcatraz, the prisoners had the backbreaking task of building their own cells out of heavy stones, while at Governors Island, there was little else to be done besides mowing the lawns or working as a courier. It was not an uncommon sight to see soldiers who had gone AWOL surrender themselves outside of the Battery Maritime Building, hoping to be imprisoned at Castle Williams.

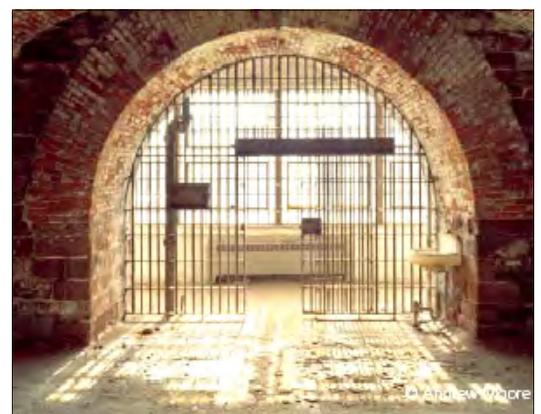


Inmates listening to a performance by the Castle Williams prisoners' band *Collier's Magazine*

A Familiar Theme

"Castle Bill", as it was endearingly called by its residents, would remain in use as a branch of the US Army Disciplinary Barracks until Governors Island's closure as an Army base in 1966. The Coast Guard did not maintain a prison in Castle Williams but readapted it for their own needs, using it as a community center featuring arts and crafts classrooms, a ballet studio, meeting rooms for the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, a daycare room, and a teen club. From the 1970s on, it was repurposed as a warehouse and landscaping shop, though every Halloween a portion of the Castle was used as a haunted house.

Just as Castle Williams had originally been built with the purpose of protecting New York Harbor from foreign attack in the early 19th century and proceeded to spend over a century as a prison, the new Coast Guard base took the aging sentinel and continued to use it to fill their needs. Today, the National Park Service has plans to continue this tradition by adapting the Castle for use as an interpretation center for New York Harbor, filling the casemates with exhibits and programming relating to the historical, ecological, and cultural facets of the harbor and allowing visitors access to the roof to enjoy the tremendous view of New York Harbor.



A casemate in Castle Williams as it looks today



Music in the Army



The 93rd New York Infantry Drums Corps in Bealeton, Virginia, 1863. These “Music Boys” are typical of field musicians during the Civil War and learned their craft at the Governors Island School of Practice from 1835 to the 1870’s. *Mathew Brady / Library of Congress.*

The early U.S. Army used music as important form of battlefield communication. It inspired troops to victory, entertained them in times of inactivity, and then, as now, accompanied fallen soldiers to their final resting place.

Prior to the invention of two-way radios, the music of the fife, drum and bugle played by field musicians was the only form of long distance communication on the battlefield. Deafening gunfire, explosions, and screams during battle made it difficult to hear vocal commands. The music played by field musicians enabled trained soldiers to fight and move as a unit.

Music was so essential to an army’s success that when the Continental Army was founded in 1775, it included a call for “a drummer or trumpeter” in each company. Marching drills were important in the training of troops. Musicians provided the essential audio cues to ensure an efficient mobile unit. When the Revolutionary War ended in 1783, George Washington ordered that all musicians keep their instruments as compensation for their service and additional hardships they faced in the war. The Army’s musical tradition continued past the American Revolution, as formal music schools were developed at military posts.

Music on Governors Island

The training of musicians on Governors Island began after the start of the War of 1812. The United States Military Academy Band at West Point sent eleven men to the “6th Infantry Band School” on Governors Island. Army bands were formed to entertain and inspire soldiers. In times of war, the bands would play in cities and towns to drum up support for the Army. The 6th Infantry Band School laid the foundation for the field music school that would come to Governors Island in the 1830s.

The earliest known reference to the “School of Practice” on the Island comes from Augustus Meyers who joined the Army in 1854 at the age of 12. The school was founded about 1836 and located in the South Battery, a fortification which was built to protect Buttermilk Channel, the body of water between Governors Island and Brooklyn.

The field musicians were boys twelve years old and up who learned fife or drum at the school. The duties of the “music boys” started at 6 AM with reveille, the Army’s form of a wake up call. Duties during the day included basic schooling and music training, along with parade duties and equipment maintenance. Once a musician was considered proficient in his instrument, he would be assigned to a regiment as a field musician. Many of the boys trained at the school marched in the Mexican and Civil Wars.

During the Civil War, field musicians continued to be the main source of communication on the battlefield. The sounds of fifers (nicknamed “straw blowers”), drummers (“sheepskin fiddlers”), and buglers, could be heard over the sounds of battle. The music of regimental bands and field musicians inspired such courage in his men that Civil War General Philip Sheridan remarked, “Music has done its share, more than its share, in winning this war”.



South Battery, first constructed in 1812 to protect the Buttermilk Channel approach to New York City, became the Army Music School of Practice in 1836. The building was the home of the "Music Boys" until its conversion to the island's officer club in 1878, a function that continued until 1996.

The Changing Nature of the Army Band

The end of the Civil War ushered in the resurgence of Western Expansion. Army musicians were swept along with the tide and brought with them the familiar rhythms and melodies that reminded pioneer families of the homes they left behind. As time moved on however, technological advancements in communication such as telephones and radios replaced the calls of fifes and drums. The School of Practice had closed by the 1880's and by the early 1900's the role of the field musician, like old soldiers, faded away.



Private Danny D'Imperio, drummer with First Army Band on Governors Island in 1965.

Even though music was no longer needed on the battlefield, it was still an important tool for the Army. The entertainment provided by a well trained band was able to raise the morale of the soldiers and the country. In 1911 Congress authorized the creation of a new music school in Fort Jay, Governors Island. The Institute of Musical Art, a forerunner of the Julliard School, taught students the skills they would need to lead a band until the Army Music School became part of the Army War College and moved to Washington, D.C. Afterwards, the 16th Infantry Regiment and First Army had bands as part of their organizations when they made Fort Jay and Governors Island their home.

Army Bands Today

Members of Army bands from World War II to the present saw an increase in their duties. Musicians are called upon to guard bases, build bunkers, and carry wounded off the battlefield. The extra duties bandsmen were performing on the battlefields were officially made into secondary missions in their battle orders in 1981. Today, those additional duties often include dealing with nuclear or biological agents in combat.

The last remaining army band in the New York area is the 319th Statue of Liberty Band, a U.S. Army Reserve unit based in Fort Totten, Queens, New York. The band is part of the 77th Regional Readiness Command, formally the 77th Infantry Division, established in New York during World War I. The 319th Army Band originated at Camp Edwards, Massachusetts, before relocating to New York City in 1950. The unit was officially named the Statue of Liberty Band in 1986 in honor of the centennial celebration of the Statue of Liberty. The band performed at the closing of the Panama Canal in 1999, and the reopening of Ellis Island in 1992. The 319th was the military band of choice for the Coast Guard base at Governors Island and performed at the closing of the base in 1996.



The insignia of the 77th Infantry Division, now the 77th Army Reserve Regional Readiness Command.

As technology and warfare have changed, so has the role of music in the military. Today there are officially 34 active duty, 20 reserve, and 52 National Guard bands in the U.S. Army. While music is no longer used for signals on the battlefield, Army bands continue to inspire and entertain civilians and soldiers with the same courage and honor of the fifers and drummers of the past.



Immigrant Soldiers on Governors Island in the Civil War

During the Civil War, Governors Island served, among other things, as a recruiting station and a training facility for Union Army volunteers. From the mid- to late-19th century, New York saw an immense influx of European immigrants, especially from Ireland and Germany, due in no small part to the potato famine of the 1840s as well as the violent European revolutions of 1848. In order to escape the consequent hardships of these events, Irish and Germans joined the millions of immigrants funneling into New York City.



A German family arrives at Castle Clinton with all their worldly possessions.

Although in smaller numbers in the 1860s, these groups of immigrants continued to come through Castle Garden (now named Castle Clinton, as it was known originally), which functioned as the immigrant processing center before Ellis Island assumed that duty in 1892. The operations at Castle Garden played a pivotal role in integrating new arrivals into American society and were particularly helpful to the naive, the poor, and the unskilled, who might otherwise have been swindled or neglected.

The 2.2 million Irish and Germans that came between 1845 and 1854 were equal to 10% of the US population in 1850. To gain some idea of magnitude of this migration, a comparable influx between 1985 and 1994 would have involved some 25 million immigrants.

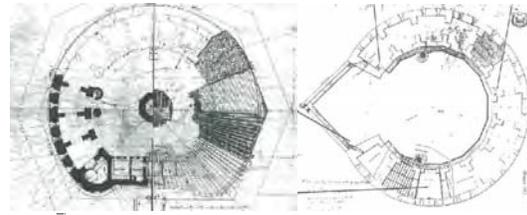
Number of Immigrants (% of total immigration)		
	Irish	German
1821-30	50,724 (6%)	6,761 (5%)
1831-40	207,381 (35%)	152,454 (25%)
1841-50	780,719 (46%)	434,626 (25%)
1851-60	914,119 (35%)	951,667 (37%)
1861-70	435,778 (19%)	787,468 (34%)
1871-80	436,871 (16%)	718,182 (26%)
1881-90	655,482 (13%)	1,452,970 (28%)

Source: Immigration and Naturalization Service

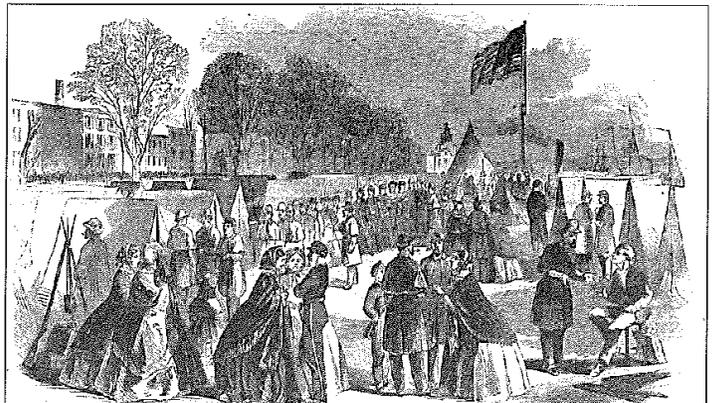
Shipped from Castle to Castle

Part of the immigrant integration process involved job placement. Immigrants coming through Castle Garden would have been beset with advertisements and by representatives from a vast array of industries. Indeed, these mid-19th century immigrants went on to build the canal system, the coalmines, the roadways, and the early industrial infrastructure of the United States. Standouts among the industry representatives were the army recruiters, who set up a huge camp in Battery Park, right outside of Castle Clinton.

Many of these recruits were shipped across the bay to be trained on the parade grounds of Governors Island and to be housed temporarily in either the casemates of Castle Williams or in tents on the grassy slope of land to the north of Fort Jay. In 1860, nearly half of the enlisted men stationed at Governors Island were born in Ireland, about ten percent were from one of the German states, and significant numbers of English, Scottish, and Caribbean natives were stationed here as American soldiers. Once the Civil War broke out, fresh troops from Governors Island were deployed to Southern forts in order to replenish Union forces and prepare for battle.



Left: Blueprints for Castle Clinton and Castle Williams, respectively. When built, they worked in tandem as Coastal Defense fortifications.



Above: U.S. Army recruiters in Battery Park regale the merits and benefits of enlisting in the United States Army to freshly arrived immigrants.

Why They Enlisted

When the Civil War broke out, recruiters in New York and in other major cities posted enlistment bills appealing to Irish and German nationalism as motivation for joining the fight. In the latter years of the war, recruitment bills tended to highlight the alluringly large amount of bounty money offered to new enlistees.

A number of men took advantage of this system by enlisting, collecting the sizeable bounty, and then almost immediately deserting their company in order to travel to a new location, enlist yet again, and collect yet another bounty. One such bounty jumper, as they were known, was James Devlin, who ended up being imprisoned and executed on Governors Island in 1865 for his repeated desertions.

Besides the relatively generous paycheck, immigrants joined the Army for various and diverse reasons. In the early stages of the war, many young men demonstrated joined the Army with their friends in search of adventure and a sense of manhood. Political leaders with strong ethnic constituencies gave flowery oratory in the streets and convinced many potential soldiers that it was their duty either to fight for their newly adopted nation or to train in the Union Army in preparation for future uprisings back in the motherland. Idealism for immigrants usually went as far as the desire to preserve the Union, as Germans at the time understood the tribulations inherent in a fractured state, but many immigrants were not motivated by the abolitionist cause. Groups of Irish New Yorkers believed that freed slaves and unskilled immigrant laborers competed for the same limited number of jobs, and this racial and economic tension helped contribute to the NYC Draft Riots in the summer of 1863.



A recruitment poster appealing to the harp of Ireland and to Colonel Corcoran, the famous son of Erin who came through Castle Clinton in 1849.

"I saw poor, famished Irishmen devour these seductive posters with their eyes, fascinated as they were by the devilish hands pointing to the complacent listing of the soldiers' rations: bread, wine, meat, vegetables, and beer." -*Ferri Pisani, New York City, 1861*

Governors Island

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

National Monument
New York



Nature in the City



Governors Island serves as a refuge for day trippers taking a break from the bustling crowds of New York City. Sitting a half mile away from Lower Manhattan visitors are welcomed to a mixture of open green spaces, trees and historic buildings. Once an active military post that served the U.S. Army and the U.S. Coast Guard, the island is an ideal backdrop to explore the natural world and how it actively shapes the life of city dwellers who might forget there is soil underneath the concrete.

On the Waterfront



View of the Manhattan skyline from west side of the island.

Standing on the waterfront in New York City is a hard to come by experience. Although it is a city surrounded by water much of the natural waterfront has been obscured by the construction of warehouses and piers up and down the coastline to meet the demands of commerce.

The island of Manhattan is 30% larger than it was when the first Dutch settlement arrived in 1624 due to landfill added in the creation of piers and bridges.

As the city shifts away from its manufacturing past, Governors Island serves as a pioneer in the revitalization of the waterfront by granting public access to sweeping views and recreational activities in a unique public space.

Changes in the Land



Hay Road marks the division between naturally formed glacial land and landfill.



Fenced off high rises on the south side of Governors Island.

Manhattan gets its name from the Lenape Indians who referred to the island as 'Mannahatta' or 'hilly island'. Today most of Manhattan has been leveled out allowing for easier building. In the process of Manhattan's urbanization it has lost much of its hilly quality.

Governors Island has seen its own series of changes overtime. It was originally formed in the wake of the retreating Wisconsin glacier at the end of the Pleistocene period 30,000 ago. The Lenape Indians of the Algonquin nation were the first humans to use the island referring to it as 'Pagganck' which translates to 'the island of abundant nut trees'. I

In the early 17th Century, the early Dutch settlement of New Amsterdam started to push Natives out the area. On Governors Island Dutch settlers set up a mill turning the abundant nut trees into lumber that would become part of some of the first permanent structures in Lower Manhattan. After losing its original forest, Governors Island has more than doubled in size with an added 102 acres of landfill from the construction of Lexington Avenue subway lines in 1901.

Future plans of the island call for even more changes. High rise buildings on the southern end of the island which have been vacant for years are set to come down and make room for a 40 acre park space.

Shady Lane



American chestnut sapling in Fort Jay planted in December 2008.



Trees in Nolan Park which date as far back to the 1870s.

A large variety of trees live on the island lending shade and charm while also acting as warriors on biological battlefield. Both the American elm and the American chestnut call Governors Island home. These two native species have suffered a similar plight. In the early 20th Century both the chestnut and elm fell victim to foreign-born fungal diseases, or blights. The American chestnut used to be the dominant in the east coast forest with an estimated population of four billion at the same time the American elm was the most dominant street tree in the eastern half of the United States at the same time.

Today finding a healthy full grown specimen of either tree is a to hard to come by occurrence. At the turn of the 20th Century a fungus introduced through a planting of Chinese chestnut trees in New York City spread a blight throughout the eastern coast of the United States that in some thirty years time wiped out 99.9% of the chestnut population. After nearly a hundred years of research and development a blight resistance version of the American chestnuts have been developed. Governors Island is now home to six blight-resistant saplings that are on their way to their full growth potential of a 120 feet.

In the 1930s as the last of the chestnuts were succumbing to blight, the American elm population started its own fight for survival. On stowaway beetles from imported lumber a new fungus was introduced into the environment that would prove deadly for the beloved shade tree. Named *Dutch Elm Disease* for its identification in the Netherlands in the 1920s it still remains a problem for mature trees throughout the country. Governors Island is lucky enough to have several healthy mature trees scattered throughout. Together the American elm and the American chestnut serve as living reminders of the danger of introducing non-native species to an environment.

Recovery



Oyster shells donated from local restaurants act as a nursery for developing oysters by Pier 101.

Since the passage of the Clean Water Act in 1972, the water bound

discharges of sewage, farm run-off, and factory waste have been regulated in order to eliminate a high amount of toxins in the water. With the regulation of water quality the Hudson River and surrounding water systems have entered a period of recovery. This federal law has contributed to improvement life for fish and other creatures that call the river home.

Governors Island has a central role in the recovery of the New York waterfront as a refuge for both terrestrial and aquatic species. New York Harbor is an estuary, a mixture of salt and fresh water, that acts as a nursery for young marine life. As the waters recover around New York so does the opportunity to reintroduce once thriving species. Oysters were once dominant in the harbor with reefs covering an estimated 350 square miles. Today an effort is being made on Governors Island to bring them back to the harbor as a partnership of several environmental groups use the area around Pier 101 as an oyster nursery.

In addition to aiding aquatic life many avian species find refuge on the island when making their seasonal migrations. Governors Island acts as ideal rest stop for the many species of birds from barn owls to warblers. A welcome stop for tired migrants to rest on their long journey.



Barn owls roosting in Fort Jay during the winter.



The Politics of Coastal Defense



Fort Jay at the start of the Civil War, 1861. As part of a national system of coastal defense, the construction of the fort coincided with growing tensions among the United States and the European powers of Great Britain and France. Ideas for this system of defense date back to 1776.

Because of Governors Island's history as a military base and the unique history of New York City, there was often an ambiguous relationship between the ideology of a national system of coastal defense and the implementation of this system on the island.

Government After the Revolutionary War

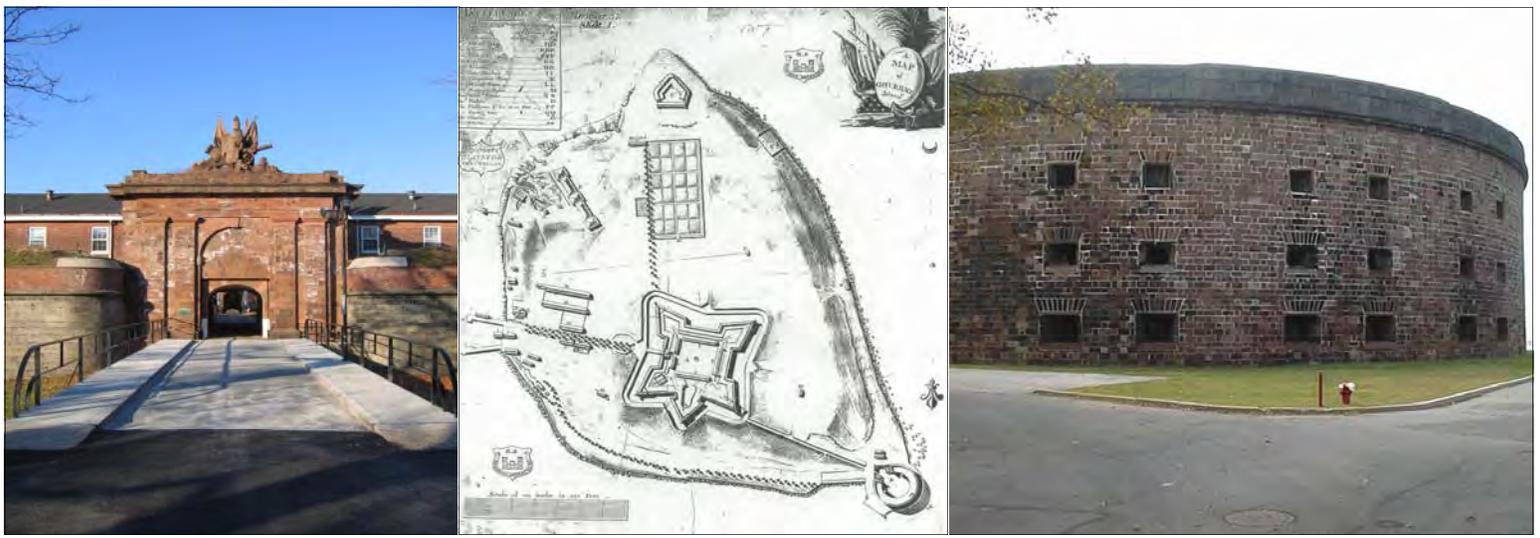
At the Continental Congress in 1776, delegates not only drafted the Declaration of Independence but also discussed the future of the government. Memories of British colonial policies affected their ideas. For one, there was a fear of large standing armies. During the 1770's New Englanders had been forced to house British troops against their will. Moreover, the delegates opposed a centralized government that could undermine liberty, the result of enduring the autocratic rule of British monarchs for decades. These discussions resulted in the formation of the Articles of Confederation, which included a weak central government, no executive branch, and one house of Congress with no ability to raise revenue.

By the mid-1780's, many realized that this system of government was ineffective. Too much power had been given to the individual states, sacrificing a united, national government in the process. Thus, in 1787, delegates at the Constitutional Convention decided to draft a new constitution. Two competing groups with contrasting visions emerged. The Federalists favored a centralized federal government at the expense of state power. Many Federalists did not trust ordinary people to have an active role in politics. New Yorker, John Jay, referring to the wealthy, once claimed that "those who own the country ought to govern it." Antifederalists, on the other hand, worried that centralized government would undermine democracy and not protect individual freedoms. The Federalist proposal was ultimately sent to the states for approval, but opposition was present, especially in New York.

Implications for New York and Governors Island

Reminiscent of the Revolutionary War when New York was divided between patriots and loyalists, the city held substantial numbers from each side of the constitutional debate, indicating that the history of New York may not be as liberal as it seems. It took seven months and the promise of a Bill of Rights for New York to narrowly ratify the Constitution by a vote of 30-27, becoming the eleventh state to do so. Despite the Federalist victory, the Antifederalist legacy remained, especially in terms of the military.

Although Federalists were in favor of a large standing army since it exemplified the authority of a strong government, the national feeling at the time was one of internal development. As a new nation, the United States' focus was directed towards domestic progress and not foreign relations. Military buildups occurred only in times of crisis, and this policy was discernible after the Revolutionary War on Governors Island. Since no military threat was on the horizon, the island was leased out to Columbia College with the goal of providing the school with the funds to build a new campus. In 1794, however, threats from Great Britain and France were the impetus for the creation of a national system of coastal defense. While the program was congressionally appropriated, it had to be approved by each state's governor, an important caveat for New York.

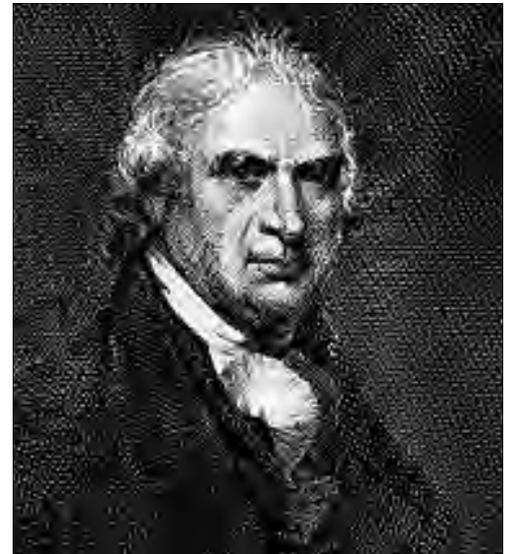


Left to right: Fort Jay. A map of Governors Island about 1813, and Castle Williams. The map illustrates the landscape of the island at a time after all three forts were completed.

The Legacy of Antifederalism

Governor George Clinton had been an Antifederalist and was distrustful of the federal government. Unhappy with funding from Congress, he called on local volunteer groups to aid in the construction of Fort Jay on Governors Island. Thus, while the fort is named for John Jay, one of the strongest proponents of Federalism, it was built by a governor who was wary of federal power. Jay had just negotiated a treaty with Great Britain that averted war. The terms, some thought, were advantageous for the British, indicative of the Federalist favor for their former colonial rulers. Understandably, Federalists were dismayed when residents of the city helped build forts in anticipation of a British attack.

New York was not the only area where challenges to Federalist policies existed. By the close of the 18th century, the Democratic-Republican Party had risen on the national stage to assume the presidency, rallying around Thomas Jefferson. The main tenets of this party included a weak central government and a small peacetime army and navy. This directly affected the development of Governors Island, culminating in Fort Jay falling into a state of “absolute ruin” by 1806. In 1807, however, American commercial ships were caught in the middle of the European conflict between Great Britain and Napoleonic France, encouraging Thomas Jefferson to improve the defense of the nation without expanding the peacetime army and navy. He ultimately focused on coastal forts in thirty harbors, including New York.



As Governor of New York, George Clinton distrusted the power of a centralized federal government and sought to affirm the rights of individual states through his policies.

Defensive Improvements

During this later system of coastal defense, improvements were made to Fort Jay. The completion of Castle Williams in 1811 and South Battery in 1812 further solidified the defenses of the island. In the years leading up to the War of 1812, relations with the British worsened, and Jay’s Treaty became more and more unpopular. Cementing Governors Island’s role as an ambiguous representation of these national movements, Fort Jay’s name was changed to Fort Columbus in 1809, as Jay’s popularity continued to decline. The name, Fort Jay, was not restored until 1904, by a great Federalist admirer, a New Yorker and Theodore Roosevelt’s Secretary of War, Elihu Root.

While the building of the forts on the island was part of a national system of coastal defense, the close proximity and conflicted history of New York City to Governors Island added unique touches to the forts that reveal the tenuous relationship between a centralized national government and state and local politics.

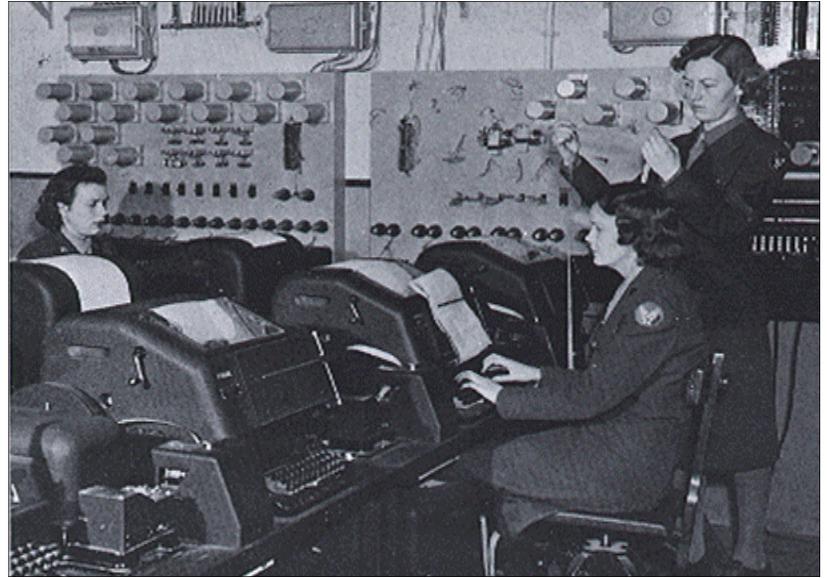
*Michael Ockay
Seasonal Park Ranger*



John Jay, first chief justice of the Supreme Court, experienced diplomat and later governor of New York. Fort Jay bears his name today and it did when it was built, but for over a century, political disfavor and historical obscurity kept this founding father’s name off the fort in favor of Christopher Columbus.



Women's Army Corps 1942-1978



Left: WAC at U.S Army base in England sort mail destined for the European Theater Operations by military unit number. Right: WAC assigned to the Eighth Air Force In England operating teletype machines

Early Women In the Army

Dating back to 1775 during the American Revolution women have been found participating in the American military services. Traditionally, women's roles were relegated to nursing and other similar duties. Their consistent contributions throughout American conflicts led to the establishment of the Army Nurses Corps following the Spanish– American War of 1898. The Army Nurses Corps was established in 1901 as a division of the Army Medical Department and later, in 1908, the Navy established the Navy Nurses Corps. Women in the Army Nurses Corps have successfully participated in every war since their establishment in 1901, which later lead to the establishment of a women's branch in the regular army.

Women's Army Auxiliary Corps

Prior to World War II women could only participate in the military through the Nurses Corps Division. Representative Edith Nourse Rogers presented a bill to Congress to establish an Army Women's Corps separate from the Army Nurses Corps. The first bill was denied due to prejudices concerning women's participation in the regular Army. Prompted by the Pearl Harbor attacks on December 7, 1941, and the consequent need to free up soldiers to go into combat, Congresswomen Rogers presented a second bill on May 14, 1942. Although tensions concerning women in the military still remained, the WAAC bill was passed establishing the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps. As an Auxiliary they were considered a separate function working in association with the military with their own rankings, and pay grades. The WAACs occupied and performed the same administrative duties as their male counterparts but were not considered to have full military status.

Life as a "WAAC"

Women all over the nation were excited by the establishment of WAAC. The first recruiting announcement had 1,000 anticipated positions and over 32,000 women applied. The requirements for joining WAAC were much different than the regular Army. Women had to be between the ages of 21 -45 with no dependents, at least five feet tall and at least 100 lbs. The average WAAC woman was college educated and held positions as teachers, administrators, and secretaries. This was much different then the demographics of their male counterparts. Upon signing the WAAC bill President Roosevelt had a goal of recruiting 25,000 WAACs by the end of its first year. This number was toppled by November 1942 just six months into its inception.



Following the Pearl Harbor attacks women were needed to free soldiers to go overseas into combat

Oveta Culp Hobby " First Director WAAC"

Oveta Culp Hobby's pioneering efforts in setting the tone and direction for the WAACs encouraged the effectiveness and efficiency of their performance. She assumed the leadership position as first director of WAAC in May 1942. Before WAAC she held a position in the Women's Interest section in the Public Relations Bureau of the War Department and was an advocate for the WAAC bill alongside Congresswoman Edith Nourse Rogers. As Director, Hobby had to overcome gender prejudices about herself and her organization from both media and the general public. She was however always able to respond gracefully to the constant criticism she received. Hobby was often bombarded with the silliest of questions such as "In the field how will they act if they can't do their makeup and fingernail polish." She responded "WAACs will neither be Amazons rushing to battle nor butterflies fluttering about." Director Hobby had high standards and pride for her troops which were integral to the successes of the WAACs.



"The Conversion"

The outstanding performance by the WAACs made them invaluable to the Army. By the end of 1942 they were placed in 400 of the 650 available positions for men in the Army. The 6669th Headquarters WAAC Platoon was one the first WAAC Units to be sent overseas. They were to assist the Fifth Army in the North African and Mediterranean Theaters, which was the first major entrance of the United States into the war. The women exceeded expectations and performed so well that more WAACs were requested to participate overseas. Being that WAAC was an Auxiliary they were not under a contractual bond like enlisted men, meaning that they could leave their positions at any time. The Army wanted to prevent losing the indispensable women so they decided to convert the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps to the Women's Army Corps. The WAC would still remain a branch, but now its members enjoyed the same status as fully enlisted men, they had the same rankings and benefits, but still occupied the noncombatant positions. Women were allowed to choose whether they wanted to go into WAC or go home. The Army anticipated that at least 50 percent would choose to leave, but over 75 percent stayed.



Collection of Recruiting Flyers from World War II for the Women's branches and auxiliaries of the military

WACs on Governors Island

The first 108 troops of WACs arrived on Governors Island on August 18, 1944. They were first housed at the Beaux's Art Apartment and Hotel in New York City while the WAC barracks on Governors Island—now Building 333). To help accommodate their arrival, a beauty parlor, date room for their male suitors and a two feet expansion of the walls to separate the women's side from the men's were all added to the barracks. WACs would participate in sports and recreation and competed against neighboring WACs from Fort Hamilton in Brooklyn, New York and Fort Dix in New Jersey. The WACs left in 1965 along with the regular Army on Governors Island making way for the Coast Guard in 1966.

Legacy of the WACs

Not until 1978 were Auxiliaries and women's branches fully integrated (except for combat positions) into the Army, and other branches of the military. Future and current women in the military can give thanks to members of the WAAC, WASP (Air Force), WAVES (Navy), SPARS (Coast Guard) and other members of women military auxiliaries and branches for their pioneering efforts in opening the doors for women's equality in the military and abroad.



Two army women currently serving in Iraq