In Defense of the Port

by Peter B. Fleischer
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Remnants of waterfront fortifications more than three centuries old dot New York harbor. These historic port defenses are among the most impressive sights on New York's oceanfront. Yet, these sites are unknown to many New Yorkers and much of their history is being lost.

New York was both a target and battlefield, but the shape and size of the harbor provided a strong defense from the days of the Dutch.

In 1776, fearing British attack, the colonial army built a series of harbor forts. Geographically, the most impressive is Fort Washington, built on a high point of Manhattan near 181st Street. In that era, New York required defenses against attack by British ships sailing south as well as north along the Hudson River.

The southern entrance to New York's harbor has historically been the most important for shipping and commerce. Consequently, the military expanded its defensive network adding new forts and advanced technology.

Castle Clinton, which was built in 1811, is located at the Battery. This low, round, stone fort operated in conjunction with Castle Williams (1811) and Fort Jay (1800) on Governor's Island. They were Manhattan's main defense against British attack. Fort Wood located on Bedloes Island (now the massive granite pedestal for the Statue of Liberty) was added to the harbor defenses in 1814.

In the aftermath of the War of 1812, new fortifications were built away from Manhattan at the Narrows. Fort Hamilton, built in 1831 on the Brooklyn shore is today an army base. Its water's edge battery, Fort Lafayette, was destroyed during the construction of the Verrazano Narrows Bridge.

In 1856, Fort Schuyler was built at the Bronx tip of Throgs Neck. In 1862, Fort Totten was built on a bluff in northeastern Queens with a commanding view of the narrow passage between Queens and the Bronx (now spanned by the Throgs Neck Bridge). Fort Totten operated jointly with Fort Schuyler. These coastal forts guarding the northern harbor entrance went unchallenged by the British and Spanish. Their guns never fired in anger.

Today, the great stone structures are museums to the era of stone, cannon and gunship. While history's ghosts abound in museums at both locations, visitors to these shorefront locales find tranquil and far-reaching views of the surrounding seas that once held the specter of foreign threat.

Fort Weed, now part of Fort Wadsworth, was begun in 1841 on the Staten Island side. Fort Wadsworth now houses Coast Guard and National Parks Service offices. At water's edge in the shadow of the giant steel bridge, is the impressive stone structure known as Battery Weed. This bastion completed in 1860 is well preserved. From this site, during World War Two, naval mines were deployed in the Narrows.

At the harbor's periphery is Fort Tilden, located on the Rockaway Peninsula by the open ocean. Today, at Fort Tilden, now administered by the National Park Service, one can visit fifty-foot high concrete gun emplacements that for decades anchored the Army's hidden artillery. These guns, together with matching batteries in New Jersey, six miles across the harbor entrance, guarded the port for half a century. Today, these wartime remnants exist between sand dunes and a beachfront forest.

Not far from the gun emplacements are the remnants of a NIKE missile battery built to defend the New York area from Cold War missile attacks. A second NIKE base was located off New Rochelle in the Long Island Sound. The missiles were removed in the seventies. Outmoded technology and detente led to a new waterfront park.

Sounding Off

New York's harbor remains threatened. Governmental neglect undermines waterfront parks and open space. Toxic dumping delays port modernization and needed expansion. Sensitive wetlands are threatened by over use and pollution.

Maintaining the port's world-class status in the context of its natural resources and its recreational potential requires that new resources be invested in the port. The public agencies whose bridges and facilities overshadow and undermine these historic monuments should contribute to their maintenance. Defending and preserving the harbor's historical resources should be among the first steps toward the preservation of the city's maritime treasures.

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