



An Old Army Town



Welcome to Fort Hancock. Established by the U.S. Army in the late 19th century, the fort is located at the northern end of Sandy Hook, a 6 ½ mile barrier beach peninsula with bathing beaches and hiking trails. But, wander into the back dunes, and you will discover the silent, empty concrete gun batteries that once made up the harbor defenses of Fort Hancock. Further on, you will come upon buildings where the U.S. Army personnel and their families once lived and worked. Today, the post may take on a ghost town-like appearance, but from 1898 to 1974, this venerable old fort defended New York Harbor and vicinity from sea and air attack with a variety of weapons.

Planning the Post



Winfield Scott Hancock
(Library of Congress)

By 1895, U.S. Army engineers at Sandy Hook had finished building two concrete gun batteries designed to defend the entrance to Lower New York Harbor. However, there was no housing available for the several hundred soldiers needed to man them. To rectify the situation, the Secretary of War issued General Order #57 on October 30, 1895 establishing Fort Hancock. The fortifications were named in honor of General Winfield Scott Hancock, a national Civil War hero.

Soon afterwards, Captain Arthur Murray, a U.S. Artillery Corps officer stationed at Fort Wadsworth, Staten Island, was assigned to scout Sandy Hook, choose a location for the fort, and make

recommendations on the layout and design of the buildings. Murray's report and rough drawings were forwarded to the Quartermaster General's Office in Washington, D.C. where draftsmen refined and revised the building plans during the summer of 1896. The highly detailed blueprints were sent to the Secretary of War, who promptly approved them. The Army was confident that the hilly and swampy ground, covering an area ¾ of a mile long and 1.4 of a mile wide, could be cleared and graded in just thirty days, and that 38 buildings, complete with utility lines, roads, walks, etc., could be built during 1897. The Army believed that an equivalent of a small town of nearly 400 residents could be built in a year!

The Fort Takes Shape

Grading of the grounds and building construction started in 1897 but the harsh Sandy Hook winters combined with labor and construction problems, extended construction until late 1899. Many of the buff-colored brick buildings were designed in the Colonial Revival style. An outstanding architectural landmark of the post is the long line of quarters known as "Officers Row." Each of the eighteen homes housed an officer and his family. In the small, turn-of-the-century U.S. Army, married officers rated their own large house. Unlike traditional Army posts, the fronts of these officers houses do not face the Parade Ground; they face Sandy Hook Bay where their spacious front porches take full advantage of breathtaking sunsets!

While officers lived in elite housing, enlisted personnel lived in four large company barracks on the other side of the Parade Ground. Each barracks was originally designed for 80 soldiers. An early resident of one was 1st Sgt. Tom Mix, who served here in 1901-1902. He would later achieve lasting fame as a popular cowboy movie star in the 1920's and 30's. Other buildings included the Post Headquarters, a Bachelor Officers Quarters, two duplexes for married Non-Commissioned Officers

(soon dubbed "Sergeant's Row"), a Quartermaster Warehouse (where Army property and supplies were stored and issued), a maintenance workshop, a bakery (fresh bread was baked daily), a 50-bed hospital, a water pumping station (to supply the post with fresh water), a stables (remember, the Army was powered by mules and horses), and a guardhouse (the post jail).

From 1900 through 1910, the post grew as other buildings were added. Most notable were more quarters for N.C.O.s and civilian employees, a Commissary, a stately Y.M.C.A. building, a Post Exchange, Laundry and Tailor Shop, a Gymnasium (complete with 4-lane bowling alley), two firehouses, four Mess Halls, and a "Double Company Barracks" designed to accommodate 220 soldiers. The population numbered between 500 and 800 military and civilian personnel at this time. Children of personnel living on post attended the Fort Hancock Public School through the 6th grade. The garrison was kept busy with an endless variety of work details, guard duty, drilling, training, and target practice at both the gun batteries and a small arms range.

An early 20th century bird's-eye-view of Fort Hancock from the northern tip of the hook.

(NPS Photo)



The Post During War and Peace

America's entry into the First World War saw Fort Hancock come alive with activity. A large number of wooden army barracks, mess halls, and support buildings were quickly constructed to house all the new troops reporting for duty. When the war ended in 1918, garrison strength was over 2,000 soldiers.

The 1920's saw little construction. During the Great Depression, a few new buildings were added in an effort to put the unemployed back to work. The Works Projects Administration oversaw the construction of a 300-seat movie theatre in 1933, a gas station in 1936, and five new officers quarters in 1939. A Civilian Conservation Corps camp was also built and run by the Army at Sandy

Hook during this time. The "CCC Boys" carried out many maintenance, construction, and conservation projects that benefited the post.

As American again headed toward war after 1940, work began on yet another generation of standard-designed wooden army barracks and mess halls. By 1943, several hundred structures were completed, housing a garrison of 7,000 to 12,000 personnel. During the Second World War, Fort Hancock served as headquarters the harbor defenses of New York City, Long Island, and most of the New Jersey shore. In the summer of 1945, the post served as a reception center for military personnel returning from Europe.

The Cold War

The weapons and tactics of World War II made harbor defense forts obsolete. While many similar forts were closed, Fort Hancock was granted a reprieve throughout the Cold War missile age due to its strategic location. From 1954 to 1974, the fort was home to Nike air defense missiles. Nike missiles were designed to intercept and destroy fast, high altitude jet warplanes long before they reached the metropolitan area.

The era of missile defense ended in 1974. The Army Air Defense Command was deactivated nationwide that year and with it came the end of Fort Hancock's military status. Army personnel and their families transferred to other military installations, while the remaining post personnel cleaned out and locked up building after building.

By the end of the year, most of the buildings were dark, empty, and silent. On December 31, 1974, the last commanding officer officially deactivated the fort.

As one era ended, another began. The fort was transferred to the National Park Service and is now administered as part of the Sandy Hook Unit of Gateway National Recreation Area. Today, the National Park Service oversees the use of many of the fort's buildings by over a dozen different educational, scientific, and environmental groups.

While the fort may no longer echo with shouted military commands and bugle calls, you just might happen to hear someone say, "Gee, I never knew all this was out here on Sandy Hook!"

The Fresnel lens of the Sandy Hook lighthouse stands watch over Fort Hancock's Officers Row and Raritan Bay beyond.

(NPS Photo)

