

Governors Island

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Governors Island National Monument
New York



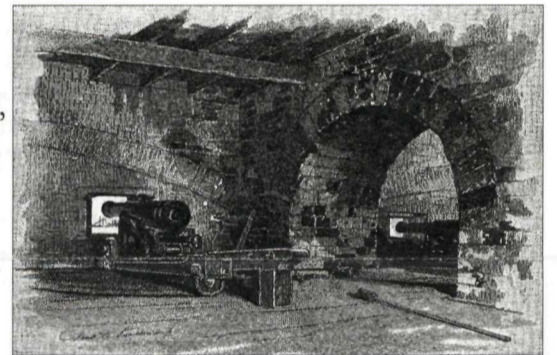
Prisoners on the Island



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.



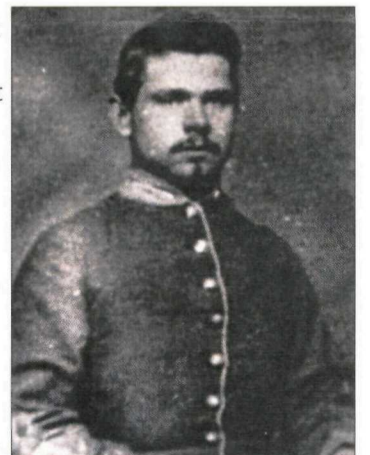
Castle Williams' bombproof casemates, once used to house over 100 cannon in total, would serve several purposes over their military careers *Library of Congress*

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.

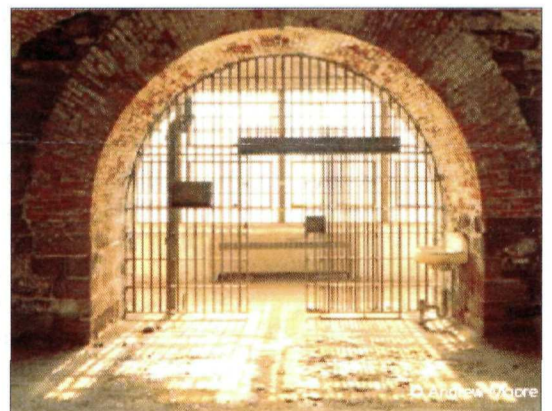


Inmates listening to a performance by the Castle Williams prisoners' band *Collier's Magazine*

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