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Fort Tilden Historic District

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Established as a permanent post in the Coast Defenses of Southern New York in 1917, and transferred to the New York Harbor Defenses in 1921, Fort Tilden served, with Fort Hancock on Sandy Hook, as the outer defenses of the New York City area from the First World War through the Cold War era. In the years of its active service Fort Tilden reflected the several changes in the tactics and technology of modern warfare and especially harbor defense. Armanent installed at Fort Tilden has ranged from the massive sixteen-inch guns of Battery Harris, emplaced circa 1924, to the Nike missiles installed in underground silos late in the 1950's. However, the resources of the fort were never called upon in an active engagement with the enemy.

Fort Tilden occupies a section of Rockaway Peninsula located near its western point on Rockaway Beach Boulevard, Queens County, New York. Acquired by the National Park Service as part of the Gateway National Recreation Area (established in 1972), Fort Tilden still retains some elements of its circa 1941 appearance, with the addition of three Nike radar and missile locations.

Fort Tilden, named for Samuel Tilden, Governor of New York and Democratic Presidential candidate in 1876. was established on February 19, 1917, on the western end of Rockaway Peninsula. This site was first acquired by the federal government when it was selected as the site for a block-house in the War of 1812. The present configuration of this end of

Rockaway Peninsula is relatively recent and dates from twentieth century installation of bulkheads, jetties and other beach protective measures. At the time of its establishment, the western boundary of Fort Tilden was 1,500 yards east of the tip of the peninsula and the intervening land was sandy and marshy, divided by small inlets and bays. This area has since been filled and additional land has been formed along a seawall which extends south from the western tip.

The fort was established as an emergency measure less than three weeks after Germany had announced its resumption of submarine warfare against the Allies and neutrals alike. Construction at Fort Tilden began almost immediately to allow the emplacement of four twelve-inch guns. Four six-inch guns, a searchlight, fire control towers and support buildings were also erected in the spring of 1917. Quarters for the fort's garrison were constructed in the following winter and a three-inch fixed anti-aircraft battery was begun in June, 1918. Presumably a wharf, such as the one presently located in the northeast corner of the reservation on Jamaica Bay, was constructed to handle this traffic. Aside from the construction of the fort, little else transpired during the course of the war. One source reported that one of the six-inch batteries fired on what was believed to be a German submarine, but otherwise, the war ended without incident at Fort Tilden.

1. Osborne, Edwin; "Rockaway One of the Major Protection Points of New York Harbor," Rockaway Review (Rockaway Chamber of Commerce, 1941), p. 25.

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Following the close of the war, when funding for military fortifications was drastically cut, Fort Tilden's garrison was reduced to a caretaking level, and construction slowed but did not cease. An inspection of the fort made in 1920 records a garrison of four officers and eighty men. At this time there were three units of temporary buildings, each containing two barracks, a mess hall and a latrine. Only one of these units was occupied. There were also seven temporary officer's quarters and two other large temporary buildings. This same report mentions the east and west six-inch batteries and the construction of a railroad track for four twelve-inch mortars.² In 1922, Fort Tilden was withdrawn from the Coast Defenses of southern New York and was assigned to the Harbor Defenses of Sandy Hook, based at Fort Hancock on Sandy Hook, New Jersey. With this reassignment, Fort Tilden became part of the Army's highly specialized system for the protection of New York Harbor from attacks from the sea. Coordination of defensive elements such as seacoast artillery, anti-aircraft artillery, submarine mining and observation, lighting and listening posts had to be worked out between Fort Hancock and Fort Tilden.

By 1922, designs were approved for the installation at Fort Tilden of the most important element in the defense system, a sixteen-inch gun battery. This new cannon which had just been perfected was the most powerful yet devised. The guns had a maximum effective range of 44,680

2. RG 407, AG 333.1, Records of the Adjutant General's Office, National Archives.

yards, firing a 2,100 pound projectile. With such a powerful weapon it was possible to shell an incoming fleet before the fleet before the ship's guns came into range. Installation of two of the sixteen-inch guns at Fort Tilden was completed by 1924. The two guns, which had been designated Battery Harris, were emplaced on circular concrete platforms approximately one thousand feet apart. Railroad track was laid out from the wharf on Jamaica Bay southwesterly across the post to the twin emplacements, which were located slightly west of the center of the fort, eight hundred and fifty feet north of Rockaway Beach. Concrete and tile magazines were constructed along the track on either side of the guns.

Although only a caretaker garrison was posted at Fort Tilden in the years before the Second World War, construction of the harbor defense elements continued. Fire control towers for Fort Tilden's batteries were erected on Sandy Hook and elsewhere, while the towers for Fort Hancock batteries were erected at Fort Tilden, among other locations. A cable hut, used to store the cable employed in the submarine mine defenses as well as a plotting room, designed to pinpoint targets, were constructed at Fort Tilden. In keeping with the Coast Artillery's increased concern with defending against air attack, a third three-inch anti-aircraft gun was added to the fixed emplacement begun in 1918. Two platoons, each with four 50 caliber guns, were also planned to supplement anti-aircraft strength.

3, RG 407 , AG 425, Annexes to Harbor Defense Project; Harbor Defenses of Sandy Hook Annex.

Searchlights and sound locators were also erected to assist anti-aircraft batteries and the mine defenses.

Portable wooden roads were provided as well, to facilitate deployment of mobile units of artillery over the grassy sand dunes which covered the greater part of the base; It was also necessary to construct shelters over the guns to prevent damage from drifting sand.

Expansion of the post's facilities required an increase of the garrison, and in 1938, construction began in order to accomodate this growth. By 1939, the ordnance building and the post hospital were completed and brick officers quarters were erected as well. The bulk of the construction which continued through 1941 consisted of the temporary wood frame cantonment buildings, of which there were about ninety. In March of 1941, there were thirty officers and five hundred men stationed at Fort Tilden; by June the number of men had doubled. The wharf area on the northeast corner of the base was also built up with storage facilities.

Circa 1943, the fortifications at Fort Tilden were updated. The twin emplacements of Battery Harris which had formerly been mounted on open platforms were installed in reinforced concrete casemates covered with earth. These large "bunkers" were designed to protect the guns from aerial bombardment and they housed the magazines as well. The bunkers

are still extant although the guns were removed circa 1948.

The six-inch gun batteries were replaced as well. Battery Kessler, the west battery, had both its guns installed in cast-iron shields. An earth-covered, concrete casemate which housed the magazines and command station was constructed slightly west of the emplacements. Battery Ferguson, the east battery, was deactivated, upon the completion of a third six-inch battery, Construction 220. The new battery, which had its two guns mounted in separate emplacements like Battery Kessler's, was built almost on the beach in the middle of the base. Its concrete casemate, which was located between the guns had the observation booth installed on top.

A mining casemate, which supplemented the main casemate at Fort Hancock, was constructed in the northwest corner of the fort.

During the course of World War II, Coast Artillery units at Fort Tilden trained intensively and maintained their preparedness, although the fort never came under fire.

By the close of World War II, it had become apparent that many traditional tactics of fortification and defense were no longer applicable. In the realm of the harbor defenses, the successful D-day invasion on the beaches of Normandy confirmed the fact that an amphibious invasion could be launched at any number of locations along a coastline. No longer

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were harbor facilities essential for landing assault troops. In the event that a harbor was to be attacked, it was more likely that the attack would be made by aircraft than by a naval fleet. In light of these shifts in tactics, a general dismantling of harbor defense commands were decommissioned and the Coast Artillery, now exclusively an anti-aircraft service, was incorporated with the Field Artillery into a single artillery branch of the Army.

The Korean War once again generated concern over defending the New York metropolitan area. In light of the higher ceiling and greater speed and maneuverability of modern bombers, anti-aircraft artillery was not considered sufficient air defense. Circa 1953, construction of surface-to-air missile installations was begun at Fort Hancock, as well as at Fort Tilden. The first missiles used were the Nike-Ajax guided missiles, which had a range of thirty miles. Circa 1960, the Nike-Hercules replaced Ajax. This improved and enlarged guided missile had a range of over seventy-five miles and was capable of carrying an atomic warhead. Four underground silos were constructed at Fort Tilden as well as six radars for tracking purposes. Circa 1967, the Fort Tilden's air defense facilities were deactivated.

Today, Fort Tilden is largely in the hands of the National Park Service. However, the Army does maintain both an Army Reserve headquarters on Rockaway Beach Boulevard and a Signal Battalion which occupies the buildings on the north shore of Jamaica Bay.

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