

# Fort Ontario Special Resource Study

Summer 2021

National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior



The National Park Service (NPS) is pleased to announce the launch of a special resource study (SRS) of Fort Ontario located in Oswego, New York. Over its almost two centuries of military service, Fort Ontario evolved from a wood and earth fortification built in 1755 to defend the British during the French and Indian War into a large-scale, 20th-century military installation through World War II. The fort hosted an unusual use for a domestic military facility during World War II—a shelter considered a ‘Safe Haven’ for almost 1,000 European war refugees from August 1944 to February 1946. After the war, the fort was transferred to the state of New York. The core fortification area has been open to the public as a state historic site since 1949.

The Fort Ontario Study Act (Public Law 115-255) directed the Secretary of the Interior to conduct a special resource study of the Fort Ontario military reservation in Oswego, New York. The purpose of the study is to evaluate the site’s national significance and determine the suitability and feasibility of designating Fort Ontario as a unit of the national park system.

The National Park Service will evaluate the property using congressionally established criteria for national significance, suitability, feasibility, and need for direct

NPS management. Based on the analysis, the National Park Service will determine whether the site meets the criteria for inclusion in the national park system and will prepare the study for the Secretary of the Interior. The study findings along with any recommendations will then be submitted to Congress.

Civic engagement and public outreach are crucial to informing the study. The National Park Service will engage the public in discussions regarding the proud military history of Fort Ontario from 1755 to 1946. Discussions of the unique history associated with the fort’s use as a shelter for European war refugees during the World War II era will also be included.

The health and safety of the public and NPS employees is a priority, and the National Park Service is working with federal, state, and local authorities to take appropriate measures to minimize potential spread of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19). Therefore, an online ‘virtual’ public meeting will be held fall 2021 to receive the public’s ideas and opinions about the study and the site. We hope you will take time to let us know your thoughts and ideas through the NPS study website. More information and project updates can be found at <https://parkplanning.nps.gov/FortOntarioSRS>.

## Contents

This newsletter introduces the special resource study for Fort Ontario and includes:

- Frequently Asked Questions
- Study Area Background
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## About the National Park Service



The National Park Service preserves unimpaired the natural and cultural resources and values of the national park system for the enjoyment, education, and inspiration of this and future generations. The National Park Service cooperates with partners to extend the benefits of natural and cultural resource conservation and outdoor recreation throughout this country and the world. The National Park Service is a bureau within the Department of the Interior and manages more than 400 park units that comprise the national park system. Administration of park units occurs in many ways, from traditional units that are federally managed to non-traditional units that rely on partnerships and may have little, if any, federal landownership.

## Frequently Asked Questions

### What is a Special Resource Study?

A special resource study evaluates the eligibility of an area to be designated as a national park or other special designation. The National Park Service collects information about the quality of resources in the study area. If the resources meet the criteria for national significance and suitability, the National Park Service evaluates the potential for visitor enjoyment and efficient management and analyzes the feasibility and appropriateness of different management options. The National Park Service provides its findings to the Secretary of the Interior who then presents a recommendation to Congress, which may differ from the study findings. Regardless of the outcome of the study, new units of the national park system can only be established by an Act of Congress or by presidential proclamation.



### How will Fort Ontario be evaluated?

The 1998 National Parks Omnibus Management Act (54 United States Code 100507) established the process for identifying and authorizing studies of new national park units. Under the law, a study area must meet all four of the following criteria to be recommended as an addition to the national park system:

1. Contain nationally significant natural and/or cultural resources.
2. Represent a natural or cultural resource that is not already adequately represented in the national park system or is not comparably represented and protected for public enjoyment by another land-managing entity.
3. Must be (1) of sufficient size and appropriate configuration to ensure long-term protection of the resources and visitor enjoyment, and (2) capable of efficient administration by the National Park Service at a reasonable cost; important feasibility factors include landownership, acquisition costs, life cycle maintenance costs, access, threats to the resource, and staff or development requirements.
4. Require direct NPS management that is clearly superior to other management approaches.

NPS personnel will evaluate the Fort Ontario site according to the above criteria for national significance, suitability, feasibility, and need for NPS management. If at any point throughout the SRS process NPS staff determine the site does not meet one of the criteria, the study will terminate and a document with a negative finding will be prepared for Congress.



## What are some possible outcomes of the study?

Once complete, the study will be transmitted to Congress for consideration and then released to the public.

Over the last 20 years (2001–2021), approximately one in three completed special resource studies have resulted in a favorable recommendation by the National Park Service, whereby the study area meets all of the criteria for inclusion in the national park system (national significance, suitability, feasibility, and need for direct NPS management). Many studies conclude that the study area resources do not meet all of the required criteria or find that existing management; technical or financial assistance; or local, state, or private initiatives are preferable to the establishment of a new unit of the national park system.

The completion of a special resource study does not establish new park units. In the event that the study results in a positive finding, Congress will decide whether

to take action or not. Regardless of the outcome of the study, new units of the national park system can only be established by an Act of Congress or by presidential proclamation. In addition, the Antiquities Act of 1906 enables the President to protect objects of historic or scientific interest on federally owned or controlled lands and reserve the land necessary for their proper care and management through a presidential proclamation. If Congress or the President does not act, it is possible that no further action will take place. There is no timeline or deadline for further action.

## When will I learn the results of the study?

The National Park Service will publicly release the finalized study report after it has been transmitted to Congress. The National Park Service generally does not release preliminary findings or drafts of the study or indicate whether the study is likely to recommend inclusion in the national park system before the study's transmittal to Congress.

## About the Study Area

The first Fort Ontario, located on the east side of the Oswego River on high ground overlooking Lake Ontario, was erected by the British in 1755 to bolster defenses along the Great Lakes. The original fort was destroyed during the French and Indian War, and two forts were subsequently built at the site—one during the American Revolutionary War and the other during the War of 1812. The current stone star fort was constructed during the 1840s to help guard against hostilities along the border shared by the United States (US) and British North American Colonies (present-day Canada). The Fort Ontario Military Reservation expanded as a military training center during the first half of the 20th century. During World War I, the Army Medical Corps operated General Hospital No. 5 at the site. The fort was used as an anti-aircraft training center during World War II and hosted training for the 369th Antiaircraft Artillery Division, the all-African American regiment known as the “Harlem Hellfighters.”

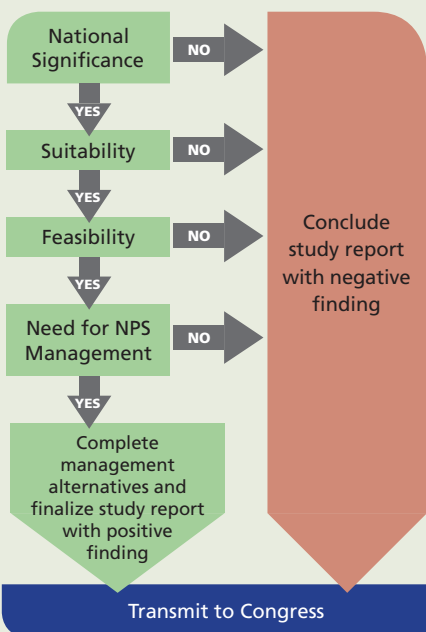
From August 1944 to February 1946, Fort Ontario hosted the only World War II emergency shelter for European war refugees on American soil. For 19 months, the fort housed close to 1,000 European war refugees, the majority of which were European Jews. After the end of the war, most of the buildings used by the refugees were demolished by the US Army before the military reservation was given back to the state of New York.

The fort opened to the public as a state historic site in 1949. It was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1970.



## The Study Process

### Special Resource Study (SRS) Completion Pathways



## How to Participate

We encourage you to learn more about the SRS process and share your ideas during this SRS process. For information and updates, visit the study site at <https://parkplanning.nps.gov/FortOntarioSRS>. The comment period will be open from September 1, 2021, to November 1, 2021. Please send your thoughts, comments, and information in any of the following ways:

- **ONLINE:** Visit the web address above and click the “Open for Comment” link.
- **BY MAIL:** Send written comments to:

**National Park Service, Denver Service Center –  
Planning Division**

**12795 West Alameda Parkway**

**PO Box 25287**

**Denver, CO 80225-0287**

**Project Manager: Hilary Retseck**

- **BY PHONE:** Contact Hilary Retseck (project manager) at 303-969-2425.
- Attend a virtual outreach session to learn about the study process and discuss the study with NPS team members. A virtual public meeting is scheduled for September 15, 2021. Information about virtual events will be posted on the study PEPC website when available.

In your comments, we are particularly interested to hear your thoughts and ideas about the following:

1. How do you feel about the potential for Fort Ontario to become a national park system unit?
2. Are there additional stories and historic resources at the Fort Ontario site about which the NPS study team should know?
3. Are you aware of documents (letters, diary entries, photographs, newspaper articles, etc.) that are not publicly available that relate to the Fort Ontario site?
4. Do you have any other comments, concerns, and suggestions for this study?

