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A History of Fort Hamilton

Brooklyn, New York

David A. Kimball

September 15, 1964

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NATIONAL SURVEY OF HISTORIC SITES AND BUILDINGS

A HISTORY OF FORT HAMILTON

BROOKLYN

NEW YORK

Prepared by  
David A. Kimball  
Historian  
Northeast Region  
September 15, 1964

## A HISTORY OF FORT HAMILTON, BROOKLYN, NEW YORK

Location: Fort Hamilton is located in the Bay Ridge section of Brooklyn. It is bounded on the northwest by Fort Hamilton Parkway, on the northeast by 86th Street, on the southeast by 7th Avenue and Dyker Beach Park, and on the southwest by the Narrows, the strait separating Long Island from Staten Island which the fort was built to command.

Ownership: Department of Defense; administered by First Army Headquarters, Governors Island, New York.

The site: Fort Hamilton is situated at the entrance of the Narrows, which, with its sister fortification, Fort Wadsworth, on the Staten Island side, it was built to defend. The Narrows, nowhere more than a mile and a half wide, has always been a key point in the defense of New York City because, except for the circuitous route through Long Island Sound, an enemy fleet bent on attacking New York can not otherwise approach the city.

The original Dutch settlers did not attempt to defend the Narrows, relying on Fort Amsterdam, at the southern tip of Manhattan Island, for the defense of New Amsterdam. Jacques Cortelyou, who founded the town of New Utrecht on Long Island in the 1650's, built a blockhouse in the vicinity of the present Fort Hamilton, not to close the Narrows to enemy shipping, but to defend his town against smugglers and pirates.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Asa R. Runyon, "History of Fort Hamilton," typescript in New York Public Library, p. 2.

Not until 1664, the last year of their possession of the city, did the Dutch consider fortifying the Narrows.<sup>2</sup>

The English appreciated the military value of the Narrows, but were just as slow as the Dutch to erect fortifications there. In 1701, an army engineer reported a defense scheme that included batteries of 30 cannon on each side of the Narrows. Two years later, with the outbreak of Queen Anne's War, funds were voted to erect such batteries, but the work was not done.<sup>3</sup> As late as August 22, 1776, during the American Revolution, the Narrows were still unfortified; on which date General Howe's British and Hessian forces were ferried across the Narrows from Staten Island to land unopposed at and below the site of Fort Hamilton and begin their Long Island campaign. Not until 1778, when France with her powerful navy had entered the war, did the British begin fortifying the Narrows, erecting two small lunettes.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Daniel D. Tompkins, The Public Papers of Daniel D. Tompkins (New York and Albany, 1898), I, 60.

<sup>3</sup> Edmund B. O'Callaghan, ed., Documents Relative to the Colonial History of the State of New York (Albany, 1883), II, 440-41. Runyon, "Fort Hamilton," 3.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 3.

## Fort Hamilton

The outbreak of war between France and England in 1792 awakened interest in strengthening America's coastal defense. In 1805, Colonel Jonathan Williams, chief of engineers, made a survey of New York harbor and prepared a comprehensive plan for its defense. As a result, the first permanent fortifications were erected in the Narrows; Fort Richmond, near Signal Beach on Staten Island, and Fort Diamond (later renamed Fort Lafayette) on Hendrick's Reef, two hundred yards off-shore from the site of Fort Hamilton.<sup>5</sup>

During the War of 1812, the British did not attack New York, as they did Baltimore and Washington, but the threat of attack gave renewed impetus to coastal defense. On March 30, 1814, New York City deeded the site of Fort Hamilton to the United States. Two years later, a joint board consisting of F. D. Elliot, U. S. Navy, and B. F. Bernard, Major Joseph G. Tolten and Lieutenant Solomon Gratiot of the U. S. Army prepared plans for the new Fort.<sup>6</sup> Surveys were made, the site prepared and a wharf built to receive building materials. On June 11, 1825, the cornerstone was laid. Work proceeded under the direction of Lieutenant K. F. Mansfield, and by October, 1831 it was ready to receive its armament and garrison.

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<sup>5</sup> Runyon, "History of Fort Hamilton," 6.

<sup>6</sup> Runyon, "Fort Hamilton," 8 ff.

When completed, Fort Hamilton consisted of a granite casemated quadrangular inner fort, protected on the three land sides by an earthwork as high as the inner fort itself. A ravelin within the earthwork at the center of the northeast face covered the sally-port. It was to mount 70 guns.<sup>7</sup> Officers' quarters, a parade ground, and other supporting structures occupied the remainder of the 160 acre reservation. During the Civil War the Fort was strengthened by a shore battery, a south battery and an east battery armed with 16-inch Rodman guns.<sup>8</sup> In 1884, installation of ten disappearing coastal defense rifles, 50 guns in casemates, and forty-eight mortars was recommended; by 1894 a large mortar battery was in place and 14-inch disappearing rifles were being installed.<sup>9</sup> Later the outer batteries, and even portions of the inner fort and its earthwork were removed to make room for more batteries of disappearing guns.<sup>10</sup>

The first garrison of Fort Hamilton was made up of Battery F, Fourth Artillery, under Captain Harvy Brown. During the Civil War, Brown, now a general, commanded troops drawn from Fort Hamilton and the other harbor forts to suppress the New York Draft Riots of 1863. From 1841 until 1846, Captain Robert E. Lee was stationed at Fort Hamilton as

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<sup>7</sup> Runyon, "Fort Hamilton," 9. Balhou's Pictorial Drawing Room Companion XIV (1858), 8 ff.

<sup>8</sup> New York Times, June 24, 1894.

<sup>9</sup> Runyon, "Fort Hamilton," fn. 8. New York Times, June 24, 1894.

<sup>10</sup> Runyon, "Fort Hamilton," 11.

Post Engineer to improve New York's Harbor defenses. In 1848, the battery of Brevet Major Thomas J. (Stonewall) Jackson was transferred to Fort Hamilton; while there Jackson was baptized and received his first communion in the Episcopal Church.<sup>11</sup>

Fort Hamilton came into early use as a troop processing center. Here, the 10th and 11th Regiments were discharged from service after the Mexican War, and the 48th New York Volunteers were processed before leaving for the battlefields of the Civil War. Men drawn from its garrison served with the 3rd Regiment Coast Artillery Corps in the Mexican Expeditionary Force of 1916, and men who had trained here with the National Guard Coast Artillery served in France during World War I. During World War I, the fort was a staging area, as it was again during World War II and the Korean War.<sup>12</sup> It remains an active military post.

#### Significance

Fort Hamilton, while it never came under attack, was for many years an important element in the defenses of New York City. It has served as a staging area for troops bound overseas in three major wars. Two of America's greatest soldiers, Lee and Jackson served tours here.

It is not of national significance. Many other camps, such as Camp Kilmer, New Jersey, were as important as staging areas. There is no evidence that their service at Fort Hamilton in any important way

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<sup>11</sup> Colonel G. F. R. Henderson, Stonewall Jackson and the American Civil War (New York, 1955), 40-41.

<sup>12</sup> Runyon, "Fort Hamilton," 10 ff. Brooklyn Salutes Fort Hamilton (Lubbock, Texas, 1963), 13-14.

shaped the careers of Lee or Jackson. Nor did the fort ever repel or help repel an attack on New York.

It is, however, undoubtedly of state and local significance as a part of the defenses of New York City for well over a century. If it should, in the course of time, become surplus to the needs of the United States, it should be considered for transfer to New York State or New York City for preservation and public use.

#### Present Condition

Numerous changes, including a rebuilding in 1959-63, have taken a severe toll of the older structures on the reservation. A portion of the pier appears to date to 1831, and two related structures may be even older. The northeast face of the 1831 inner fort, with its sally-port and casemates survives, as does the ravelin and a portion of the earth-work. The house in which Lee lived may still be standing. None of the outer batteries survive, not even the disappearing rifles of the 1890's, and it is unlikely that any of the structures on the remainder of the reservation pre-date the Civil War.

References: Brooklyn Salutes Fort Hamilton, Brochure, published by C. F. Boone Nationwide Publications, Inc., (Lubbock, Texas, 1963); Rodman Gilder, The Battery, (Boston, 1936); Col. G. F. R. Henderson, Stonewall Jackson (New York, 1936); John W. Leonard, History of the City of New York 1609-1909 (New York, 1910); Louis Morris, A Military History of the Battery from the Dutch Settlement 1626 to the Razing of Fort George 1790 (N.P.S. Report, 1963); Edmund B. O'Callaghan, Documents Relative to the Colonial History of the State of New York (Albany, 1883); Lt. Henry Purcell, Information Officer, Fort Hamilton, interviewed August 28, 1964; Lt. Asa R. Runyon, History of Fort Hamilton, a type-written report of 18 pages, dated March 1928, in the Local History Room, 315 G, in the New York Public Library; Henry R. Stiles, A History of the City of Brooklyn (Brooklyn, 1867); I. N. Phelps Stokes, The Iconography



of Manhattan Island 1498-1909 (New York, 1916); Daniel D. Tompkins, The Public Papers of Daniel D. Tompkins, Governor of New York 1807-1817 (New York and Albany, 1898); James G. Wilson, ed., The Memorial History of the City of New York, (New York, 1893); Daniel Van Pelt, Leslie's History of Greater New York, (New York, no date).

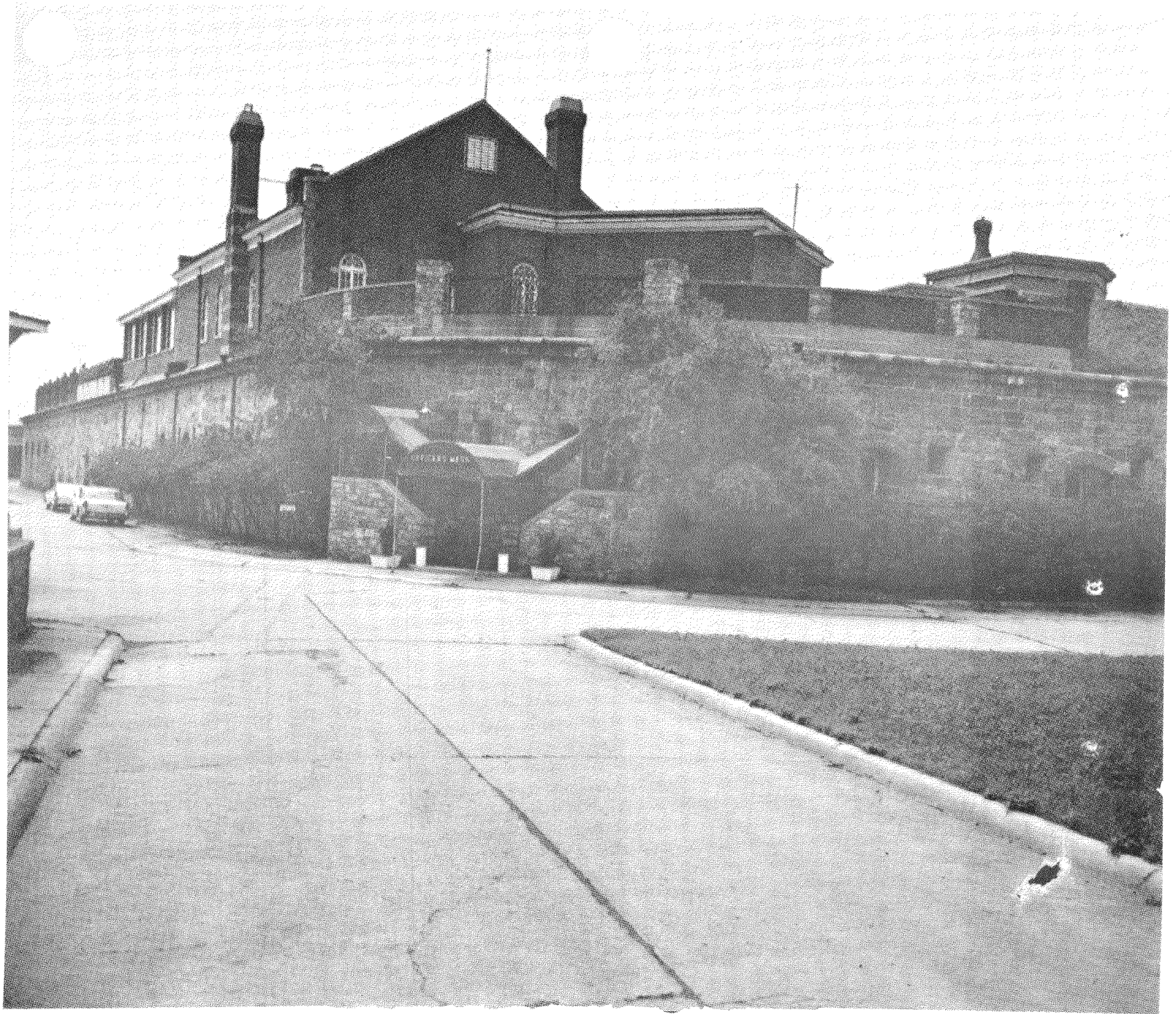
Aerial view of  
FORT HAMILTON  
Brooklyn, New York



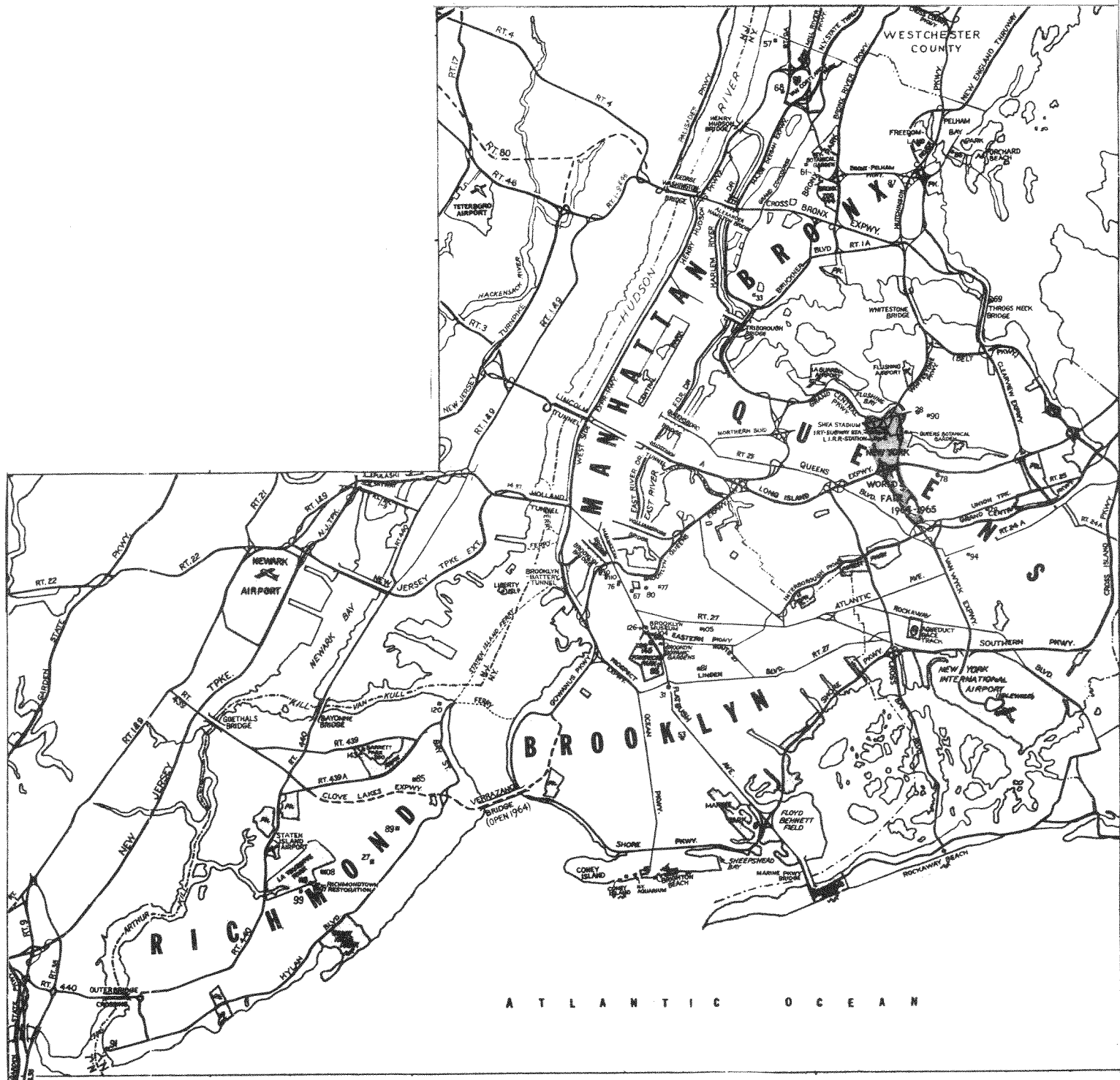
**OFFICERS' OPEN MESS**

Fort Hamilton

Brooklyn, New York

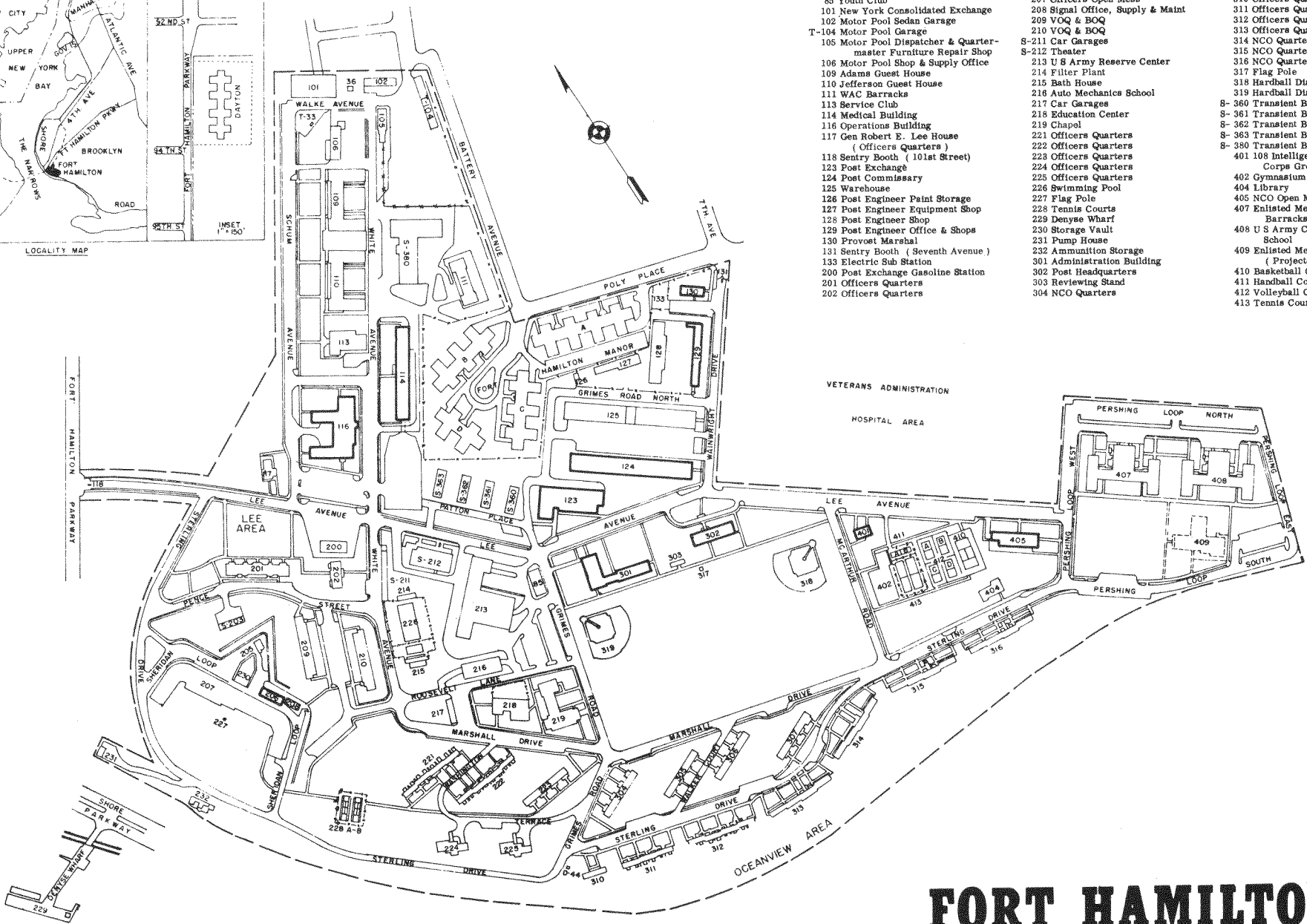
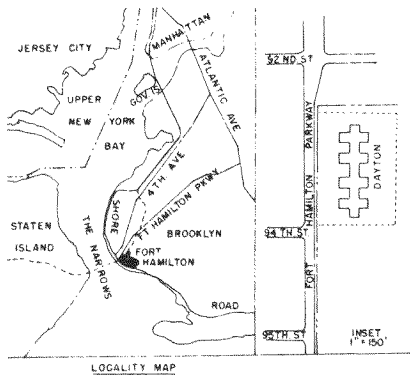


**Vicinity Map**  
**FORT HAMILTON**  
**Brooklyn, New York**



Print of  
FORT HAMILTON  
Brooklyn, New York





Bldg	Activity	Bldg	Activity	Bldg	Activity
T- 33	Special Services Auto Crafts Shop	S-203	Car Garages	305	NCO Quarters
36	Motor Pool Gasoline Station	205	Signal Garage	306	NCO Quarters
D- 44	Cable Hut	206	Signal Switchboard & Photo Lab	307	NCO Quarters
85	Youth Club	207	Officers Open Mess	310	Officers Quarters
101	New York Consolidated Exchange	208	Signal Office, Supply & Maint	311	Officers Quarters
102	Motor Pool Sedan Garage	209	VOQ & BOQ	312	Officers Quarters
T-104	Motor Pool Garage	210	VOQ & BOQ	313	Officers Quarters
105	Motor Pool Dispatcher & Quarter-master Furniture Repair Shop	S-211	Car Garages	314	NCO Quarters
106	Motor Pool Shop & Supply Office	S-212	Theater	315	NCO Quarters
108	Adams Guest House	213	U S Army Reserve Center	316	NCO Quarters
110	Jefferson Guest House	214	Filter Plant	317	Flag Pole
111	WAG Barracks	215	Bath House	318	Handball Diamond
113	Service Club	216	Auto Mechanics School	319	Handball Diamond
114	Medical Building	217	Car Garages	8- 360	Transient Barracks
116	Operations Building	218	Education Center	8- 361	Transient Barracks
117	Gen Robert E. Lee House (Officers Quarters)	219	Chapel	8- 362	Transient Barracks
118	Sentry Booth ( 101st Street)	221	Officers Quarters	8- 363	Transient Barracks
123	Post Exchange	222	Officers Quarters	8- 380	Transient Barracks
124	Post Commissary	223	Officers Quarters	401	108 Intelligence Corps Group
125	Warehouse	224	Officers Quarters	402	Gymnasium
126	Post Engineer Paint Storage	225	Officers Quarters	404	Library
127	Post Engineer Equipment Shop	226	Swimming Pool	405	NCO Open Mess
128	Post Engineer Shop	227	Flag Pole	407	Enlisted Mens Barracks
129	Post Engineer Office & Shops	228	Tennis Courts	408	U S Army Chaplain School
130	Provost Marshal	229	Denyse Wharf	409	Enlisted Mens Club ( Projected )
131	Sentry Booth ( Seventh Avenue)	230	Storage Vault	302	Administration Building
133	Electric Sub Station	231	Pump House	303	Post Exchange Gasoline Station
200	Post Exchange Gasoline Station	232	Ammunition Storage	304	Reviewing Stand
201	Officers Quarters	301	Administration Building	412	Volleyball Courts
202	Officers Quarters	302	Post Headquarters	413	Tennis Courts

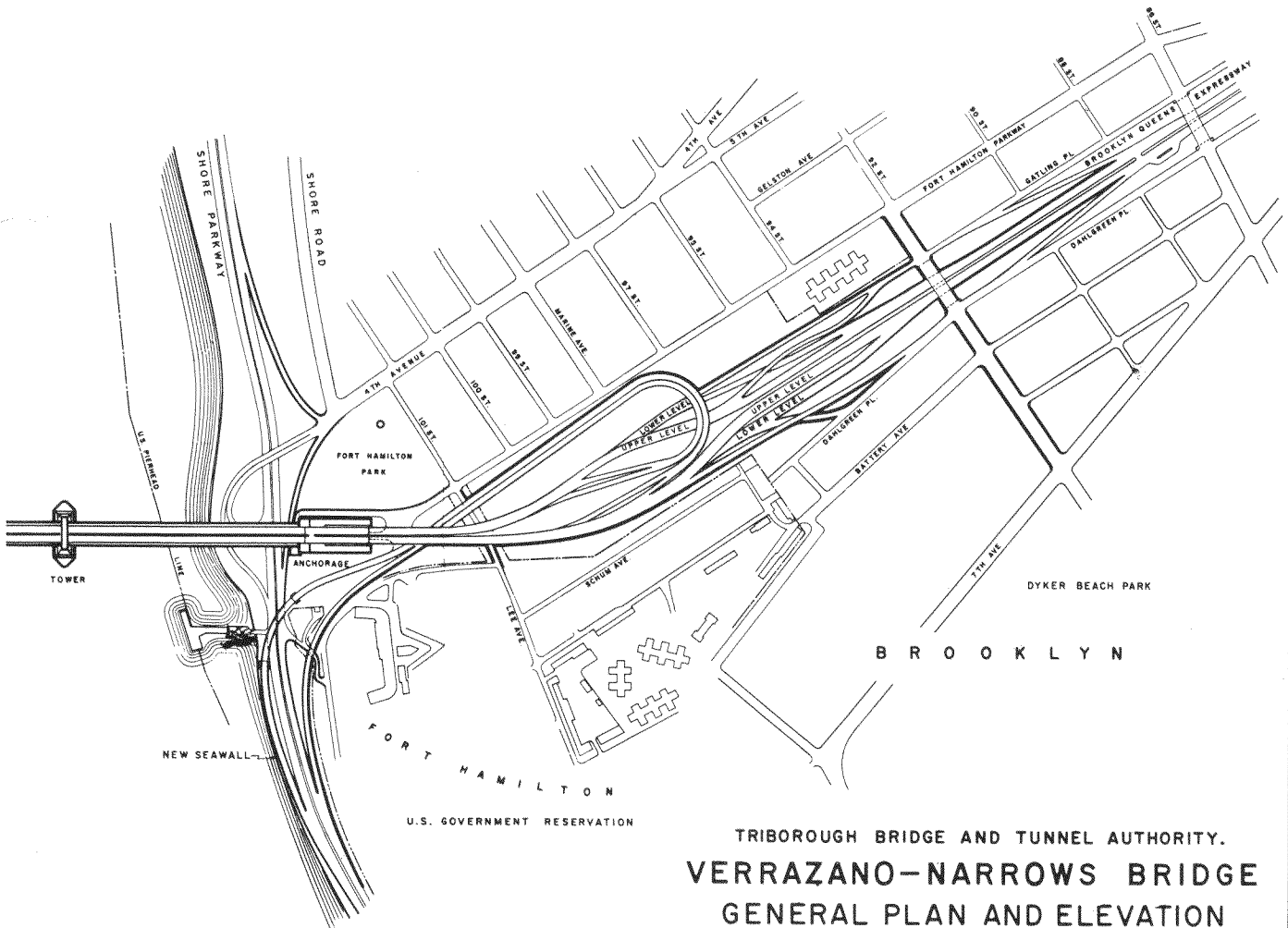
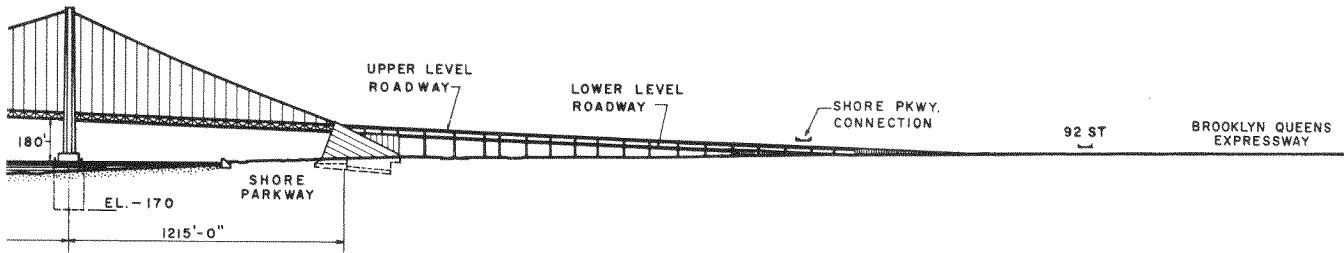
# FORT HAMILTON

Verrazano-Narrows Bridge

FORT HAMILTON

Brooklyn, New York

TOP OF TOWER  
EL. + 693



TRIBOROUGH BRIDGE AND TUNNEL AUTHORITY.  
**VERRAZANO-NARROWS BRIDGE**  
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