

Restoration of *David's Island*

By Dr. JoAnne Castagna



Photo courtesy United States Army Corps of Engineers

Decaying homes with blown-out windows, overgrown grass on lawns, and 1950s vintage cars parked in dilapidated garages. That was the scene at David's Island—more like the surreal landscape in a disaster movie, as if the residents of this little village just picked up and left. This aptly describes the abandoned remains of Fort Slocum, a former United States military base that at one time occupied David's Island, an uninhabited 80-acre piece of property located in the Long Island Sound, one-half mile off the shore of New Rochelle, New York.

In December 2008, the United States Army Corps of Engineers completed its work at the site (begun in 2005) of demolishing and removing 93 decaying structures, thereby creating open space. This work was performed at the request of the Office of Economic Adjustment and the city of New Rochelle, the island's owner, who plans to revive it and make it accessible for public use.

Military Chronicle

In 1867, Fort Slocum was established on the island where a Civil War hospital once stood, and in over a century the fort has reappeared in

various military incarnations. The active post was used for several years by the United States Air Force and has served as a military hospital, an artillery mortar battery, and a training post. Fort Slocum was a staging area for troops heading overseas during the two world wars, and during World War II was the most active recruitment center in the United States.



Photo courtesy Fort Slocum Alumni and Friends Collection

Oblique aerial photograph of Fort Slocum, 15 November 1961

The fort's last military incarnation was as a missile command base in the 1960s. Since then, the island has lain dormant, and the public has been denied access. However, Davids Island has been eyed as a possible location for a power plant. In addition, the sanctuary's wide variety of marine life and birds and more than a mile of beach have made it tempting for real estate mogul Donald Trump to consider placing luxury condos on its shores. For whatever purpose is decided for the island, the Corps has made the site clean and safe for the public while also preserving the area's wildlife—which includes threatened animal species—and its rich military history.

Ecological and Historical Concerns

In more recent years, Davids Island has been considered as a location for a public park and nature preserve. In New York State, the osprey is considered a "species of concern," which means the bird's population has declined in the past and is making a slow recovery. The first task the project team performed before beginning any demolition was to move a large osprey family nest inland from the island's pier in order to protect it from the construction.

The project might seem an easy one—demolishing buildings with a standard complement of the right equipment. But more than that, there was great interest to preserve some of the rich history of the island. The Corps understood this and, as in many times past, came up with a variety of solutions to support the historical aspects of the project. Extensive research was performed on each of the island's 93 structures, which were of varying military architectural styles.

This research included digging up historical data, taking photos, and performing archeological studies. About one-third of the structures were identified as having historical or archeological significance and, if desired, could be restored or partially restored. After research was completed on each of the buildings, the structures were demolished if they were determined not restorable. In this way, construction and historical preservation efforts worked in tandem to move the project forward without wasting time and money.

Demolition or Preservation

Last fall, one of the key structures on the island was demolished, marking the near completion of the project. The island's large water tower that has been a sailing "landmark" for more than 78 years, and which marks the edge of the island, was brought down. Much of the material waste from the demolition that included a large amount of steel is being recycled, especially from the water tower. Hazardous materials, such as asbestos, are being removed and brought to licensed facilities.

The Corps worked with a number of interested parties from Westchester County and the city of New Rochelle to determine what should be done with those historic structures that could be preserved. City officials decided to not restore any of the island's structures to avoid funding their maintenance before the use of the island is determined.



Photo courtesy Tetra Tech EC, Inc.

Drill Hall/gymnasium, built in 1909

However, remnants of the former fort will be preserved on the island for the public to view, including the fort's overall landscaped vegetation, a seawall, the flagpole, mortar pits from the late nineteenth century, tennis courts, walkways, and a cannon used during the Spanish-American War.

Summary

To enable the public to find out more about these historic items—as well as other aspects of the fort—the Corps, the Westchester County Historical Society, and the New Rochelle Public Library are collaborating to create a virtual archive and public exhibit that will be viewable on the Internet. This virtual archive and exhibit will include all of the extensive research the Corps gathered during this project, in both print and audio formats, including the historical data on each of the fort's structures, photos, maps, videos, and oral histories from more than two dozen individuals who used to live and work at Fort Slocum. In addition, various museums will include the Corps reports in their archives.

The future of the island is still undecided, but what is certain is that what has primarily been a wildlife sanctuary will soon be accessible to the public. And speaking of wildlife, the osprey family—whose nest had to be moved at the beginning of this project—has since grown threefold. Maybe this signifies an adaptable and prosperous future for Davids Island.



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