



Fort Hancock Historic Walking Tour

It takes a village...

Fort Hancock was originally built by the US Army Quartermaster Department to garrison 400 soldiers. The idea was to create a comfortable post for soldiers to live and work; a fort that would function with military precision, as well as a village to provide services and social support for making the bleak realities of military life more tolerable.

By fall of 1896, the final number of buildings settled at 32 and construction quartermaster Captain Carroll Devol chose to build them using buff or yellow brick—a substance chosen for its ability to withstand harsh maritime weather. Buildings included officers' quarters, enlisted men's barracks, bachelor officers' quarters, post headquarters, hospital, guardhouse, quartermaster storehouse and bakery.

By 1911, just 13 years later, the Post had grown to include a commissary and Post Exchange. And like most small towns it could now also boast of a library, fire station, chapel, school, YMCA, laundry, and tailor shops for military and their families.

...to raise a soldier

Unlike most small towns, Fort Hancock was heavily equipped with gun batteries designed to defend New York City from enemy warships. The nine-gun battery was built between 1897 and 1902 and has the distinction of being the only U.S. coast defense battery built between 1890 and 1945 that mounted nine disappearing guns—disappearing because they were invisible from sea. The guns were loaded behind protective concrete walls, lifted to be fired and returned to safety behind the walls.

Unlike most small town residents, Fort Hancock residents were soldiers who had to be ready to protect and defend instantly. Fort Hancock's soldiers could fire 1000 pound shells miles out to sea with pin point accuracy, a fact well publicized in the press. No enemy battleship ever attempted an attack.

That's an order!

Order and discipline are essential to maintaining not only a powerful military force but also a happy, well-adjusted military garrison. Army Quartermaster architects understood this and incorporated these ideas in the original design of Fort Hancock. Colonial Revival architecture was chosen for its simple, elegant lines and traditional form. Even the landscaping reflected a military sense of order. Trees were planted in rows like soldiers lined up for inspection.

Rank hath its privileges

Maintaining a chain of command is another way the Army upholds order and discipline. It is an invaluable military tool and vital to keeping the troops ready. As such, there is a class system in the Army. Officers outrank non-commissioned officers and enlisted men and have certain privileges for the added responsibilities of their positions.

Nowhere were the privileges of rank more clearly defined at Fort Hancock than in the housing. Married officers lived on "Officers Row," the most outstanding architectural feature of the fort. Each of the 18 homes housed an officer and his family. Each had spacious rooms flooded with light. Typically, at Army forts, officers' homes faced the Parade Ground. Here at Fort Hancock, however, they were built facing the Bay for its cool breezes and beautiful sunsets. The Commanding Officer had the largest house on post—the most rooms and at 5,402 square feet, the most square footage. "Captains Quarters" each had 4,750 square feet and a second floor with five bedrooms, while Lieutenants lived in approximately 4,550 square feet, with four bedrooms on the second floor.

Non-Commissioned Officers and their families lived in simple houses on "Sergeants Row," while married junior grade Sergeants lived in smaller wood structures scattered around the post. Single NCOs lived in barracks with their men. Single enlisted men lived on "Barracks Row" which faced the main Parade Ground. Each of the four buildings that made up Barracks Row originally housed 80 soldiers. Each barracks originally had its own mess hall, latrine, barber and tailor shop.

Keeping the peace

The greatest period of expansion at Fort Hancock occurred during World War II. Between 1941 and 1944, the post's peacetime population of approximately 800 swelled to 12,000 men and women, military and civilian. Imagine thousands living at the tip of this tiny peninsula. How did the army keep the peace in the harbor and at the post?

Anti-aircraft guns, floating mine fields and radar (newly perfected at Fort Hancock), became the key weapons for defending the harbor; while baseball, softball, football, handball and bowling helped to keep the peace day to day at the post.

The Sandy Hook Foghorn, the fort's WW II era newspaper kept everyone informed of post events and important issues—the opening of a new library, an upcoming Judy Garland visit, promotions and commendations for bravery, births, engagements, marriages, arrests, ball game scores, movies, recitals and concerts, local amateur shows and theatre performances in New York.

The women of Fort Hancock created fantasy with tea parties and balls. Conga dancing classes were offered. Traditions were embraced with gusto--Thanksgiving and Christmas dinners became grand affairs. Carolers sang. New Year's Eve was cause for great celebration.

Keeping morale high during WW II made for happy troops and happy troops were more likely to perform their jobs well. The value of teamwork could not be overstated. Soldiers who work and play together and who live and drill together, will act together when manning the guns.

Fort Hancock, today

Fort Hancock was deactivated in 1974 and is administered today by the National Park Service as part of the Gateway National Recreation Area. Park Service personnel occupy many of the buildings; others are leased to a variety of non-profit educational and environmental groups.

