

Boston Harbor Islands

IslandCache Program

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



Site 5: Harbor Defense

N 42° 19.285' W 070° 55.694'



“The third system (of fortifications) was begun in 1817 under relatively tranquil circumstances. Immediacy was no longer an overriding consideration, and attention could be directed at last to the creation of a permanent and truly integrated system of harbor defenses.”—Emanuel Raymond Lewis

Boston Harbor was not as active in military conflicts as other cities and regions throughout the United States. For the most part, Boston Harbor and its islands were used as intelligence or training stations, or prisoner-of-war camps. Fort Warren on Georges Island was primarily used as a prison for Confederate soldiers and dignitaries during the Civil War.

A Fort is Born

Construction of Fort Warren began in 1833, and was not completed until 1861. Considered obsolete long before completion, Fort Warren was designed by Sylvanus Thayer, who also designed Fort Independence on Castle Island. Thayer named the fort for Major-General Joseph Warren—a renowned Revolutionary War hero who was killed in the Battle of Bunker Hill. The fort’s design includes a five-point bastion

system—constructed using hand-shaped granite blocks from Quincy and Cape Ann, Massachusetts. The fort also featured a dry moat, terrestrial ramparts, a “murder room”, and 181 Rodman cannon mounts. The sheer mass and obvious presence was not a mistake in design; the fort was meant to deter invading warships upon first sight.

The Fort Inaction

Though the fort was an active military installation during the Civil War, it primarily served as a prisoner-of-war camp for Confederate soldiers, sailors and captured politicians. The most famous “residents” of Fort Warren’s cells included the Vice President of the Confederate States of America, Alexander Hamilton Stephens, Generals Lloyd Tilghman, Isaac Trimble and Adam “Stovepipe” Johnson, and British diplomatic envoys, James M. Mason and John

Slidell. The fort underwent modernization efforts during the Spanish-American War, and again in the First and Second World Wars when it was employed as a mine control center for two minefields off Georges Island. The concrete batteries you see throughout the fort were added during the modernization efforts of the Second World War. In the 1940s, soldiers that received training at Georges Island were likely to be sent to fight in Europe.

Fort Warren Today

Fort Warren is a National Historic Landmark and a major tourist attraction at Boston Harbor Islands. Georges Island is visited by more than 100,000 people annually, some of who come to explore the fort while others use the island as an access point for the other islands. Fort Warren is also a wonderful educational tool. During the off-season, the National Park Service

brings Boston-area schoolchildren to Fort Warren to learn about fort construction, harbor defense, and maritime history first-hand. You are invited to get a similar experience. Take time to thoroughly explore the fort’s hospital, bakery, powder magazine, ramparts, and the hallways where the ghost of the “Lady in Black” is believed to haunt.

Next Clue: The placement of Fort Warren on Georges Island was strategic: within firing range of the outer harbor and along the major shipping channel. The “tower” located on the fort was constructed within sight of the entranceway to the port of Boston, giving the soldiers who stood guard a great view of all incoming ships.

N 42° 32.140'
W 070° 92.822'