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 1916, 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 the only U.S. coast defense battery built between 1890 and 1945.

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Keeping the peace

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The Sandy Hook Foghorn, the fort’s WWII 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 the at 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 WWII 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.

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.

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.

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