Fort Schuyler

“The only things needed at Fort Schuyler... to make it the most popular post in the army, are a lawn mower and a brass band.” – New York Times, July 3, 1911.

“I found the tunnel,” shouted Sergeant Major Clay Doster. He emerged from a dingy hole covered with mud and grime. Again he yelled, “The tunnel under the old fort that was supposed to be under the Sound to Fort Schuyler! It really exists!” He immediately reported it to his superiors at the Post Headquarters of the 62nd Coast Artillery at Fort Totten, Queens.

The news became a splash and Doster’s spelunking adventure was reported in the Daily Brooklyn Eagle on June 17, 1937. Doster, according to the report had “wriggled” about 500 yards through a tube four feet wide and three feet deep. He found the entrance by “an old powder crypt” and then “a winding staircase beginning at what is supposed to be the second level of the old fortifications [of Fort Totten] and winding downward” toward Long Island Sound. Doster was halted only when he came to a wall of mud, dug into it, and water began to rush in.¹

The legend of the tunnel is a time-honored urban legend of New York’s old coastal fortifications. Fort Totten, where Doster was, faces its counterpart fortification, Fort Schuyler, across Long Island Sound. The most persistent rumor, among the several, that surrounds the fort, is that a tunnel was or was supposed to be built around 1862 to transfer personnel under the water without being exposed to enemy fire.
In 1974, Robert Moses made an investigation to find out the truth about the “old yarn” but soon hit a “dead end” like many other investigators. Doster’s tunnel could never be explored because of the water in it, and over the years, several experts dismissed it for engineering reasons. In 1974, Sal Valenza, the deputy chief engineer of the New York Transit Authority who was a specialist in tunnel digging asserted that in 1862 that the rock sound enough for a tunnel were well below the river bed and technically impossible to bore. In addition, building a tunnel in a sand trench had not been developed until well after the Civil War.²

So where did the legend come from? Dr. Fred Hess, a long-time faculty member of the college investigated this specific rumor and said that it was due to a misreading of a map. Hess wrote, “I… checked with New York City engineers [and] I was assured that no such tunnel had ever existed. Apparently someone had taken a city map and added a pair of dotted lines between the two forts. Later someone found the map, saw the lines, assumed that they indicated an existing tunnel, and began to spread the incorrect information.”³

In addition to this, there are no extant U.S. Army records of a tunnel being built. This includes maps, diagrams, and blue prints of both forts. Many enthusiasts have spent time crawling through sewage drains at both forts coming up with nothing but smelly clothes. In 2008, the History Channel’s show, Cities of the Underworld, attempted to explore the tunnel from the Fort Totten side, but like Doster, they found that the tunnel they had gone into collapsed. In 2009, explorations were made by historian David Allen, with no concrete results. Professor Allen noted that although, “Every legend has a basis in fact” there has been little progress in discovering the tunnel. Allen said, “There have been people looking for this thing for the last 100 years. Now it’s up to us to find the truth.”⁴
Proponents of the tunnel’s existence argue that the tunnel is impossible to find now because of changes to the landscape. Some state that the entrance was destroyed or sealed in the 1930s during the massive reconstruction project by the Works Progress Administration when the fort was taken over by the New York State Merchant Marine Academy (now SUNY Maritime College). The most curious of all tunnel seekers are the students of Maritime College.

In 1975, a student wrote of finding the tunnels at both forts. These tunnels were explored and again they found the same problems as Dosten. The student wrote, “In hopes of keeping the curious away, it has been said that the supposed tunnel is no more than a storm sewer and that is why it dwindles away to nothing somewhere out in the river.” The student went on to state that if this was indeed the tunnel, that it either collapsed, or harmed when the river was dredged, or destroyed during the construction of the Throg’s Neck Bridge.5

The most reasonable theory was posited by alumni Brendan Thompson (class of 1991), who consulted the records of the reconstruction of Fort Schuyler. He theorized that the tunnel was not in fact built during the Civil War, but part of a modernization effort of Forts Totten and Schuyler in the latter 19th century, called the Endicott Fortification Period. Thompson posited that the tunnel was built to route electrical mine cables to the sea and only extended as far as the sea wall. The entrance to the tunnel was covered up during the reconstruction.6

There is no absolute proof that the tunnel existed or not. Yet until more concrete records are found, only the river knows the truth. Many students of the Maritime College are curious about the place they call their home and surprised to learn that Fort Schuyler had a long history prior to its transfer to the school. The history of the fort and the surrounding area of Throggs Neck is mostly fragmentary, but still shows how ingrained the structure was in New York and American history.
**Throggs Neck**

Throggs Neck is indisputably one of the great strategic chokepoints for ships approaching New York City from Long Island Sound. At less than a mile across to Willets Point, Long Island, control of the peninsula is essential to manage shipping to New York from the northern seaward approach. As such, it was seen early on by the American government as an ideal location for a coastal fortification.

The first inhabitants of the region of Throgg’s Neck (known to Europeans) were probably the Algonquin Siwanoy Indians. The first written account of them was provided by the English Captain Thomas Dermer, who sailed under the orders of Fernando Gorges, founder of the Maine colony. Dermer passed through Long Island Sound toward Hell’s Gate. As they approached Throgg’s Neck, “A great multitude of Indians let fly at us from the bank, but it pleased God to make us victors.”

Information concerning the Siwanoys is scant, and in the historical record there is little data. The most concrete information of Indian inhabitation are archaeological such as the discovery of a massive shell heap at around the intersection of Schley and Clarence Avenues. This trove contained not only shells, but bone implements such as awls, needles, and jewelry such as animal-tooth pendants. They lived in small villages near the shore and subsisted upon corn, beans, and squash as well as collecting shellfish.

European settlement of the area began in 1609, with the establishment of the Dutch Colony of New Netherland. However, New Netherland was slow to grow when compared to the English colonies that neighbored it in New England. With an eye to colonize new areas of the
territory, the Director-Generals of the Dutch colony began to invite English colonists to settle in New Netherland.

One such invitation was extended in June, 1641, by the administration of Director-General William Kieft. However, there were conditions. The English had to swear loyalty to the States-General and the Dutch West India Company, use Dutch weights and measures, and not construct fortifications. In exchange, they were guaranteed freedom of religion, local rule, and the right to hold the land without taxes for ten years. The first of these guarantees was a major attraction. Many of those who took up the Dutch offer were disaffected New Englanders who chaffed at Puritan theocracy and wished to pursue their own interpretations of Christianity such as the famous Anne Hutchinson whose independent mysticism made her unwelcome in Puritan New England.

Along with Hutchinson, one of those who took the Dutch offer was John Throckmorton. Throckmorton, was a personal friend of the famous religious dissident Roger Williams, and migrated to Boston with him on the ship Lyon in 1630. Williams, who butt heads with the authorities in Boston, migrated to Rhode Island in 1636. Throckmorton joined him and became one of the first founders of Providence and subsequently converted to Williams’s Baptist Church in 1638.

However, by 1642 there was fear that the Puritans of New England were going to attempt to assert control over Rhode Island. Williams went to England to seek out a charter, but Throckmorton appealed to the Dutch who granted him a license on October 2, 1642 which allowed him and his pilgrimage of thirty-five families to settle, “within the limits of the jurisdiction of their High Mightinesses.” So Throckmorton moved to the region the Dutch
referred to as *Vriedelandt.* This agreement was solidified on July 6, 1643 when Kieft gave to Throckmorton a deed to the land.\(^{12}\)

This grant, was known as Throckmorton’s Neck and formed much of the present-day eastern Bronx. The northern boundary was Eastchester Neck, in the east, Eastchester Bay and Long Island Sound; and in the South the East River. The Westchester Creek was the western border.\(^{13}\)

Throckmorton’s group settled in and subsequently, the Siwanoy grew troubled at this encroachment. Although they had signed the land over to the Dutch two years prior, their perception of land usage differed from Europeans. Since no one was using the land, it naturally would revert back to the Indians. In addition, the Siwanoys were so fragmented that any of the signatories to the land purchase were probably not valid authorities to turn over the land for all of the tribes in the region.\(^{14}\)

In the summer or fall of 1643, the Siwanoy attacked the English settlements of Hutchinson and Throckmorton. While Throckmorton himself was not present, a passing vessel noticed the attack and evacuated some of the settlers of Throckmorton’s land. Two boatmen and some cattle were the only casualties of the Indians’ attack. Throckmorton never returned to the Dutch territory but rather returned to Rhode Island, became a Quaker, and died in 1684.\(^{15}\)

So Throckmorton’s legacy to the region is solely his name, and the region became known as “Throckmorton’s Neck.” Yet this became bastardized to variant spellings of Throgmorton’s Neck, Throgg’s Neck, Throg’s Neck or even Frog’s Neck (among numerous other variations), with or without the apostrophe.\(^{†}\) The land was later repopulated by colonists who established

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\(^{*}\) Translation means roughly *Land of Peace.*

\(^{†}\) There has been a persistent rumor that the current spelling of Throgs Neck was started when Robert Moses needed to shorten the name of Throgs Neck for the bridge he built. This is disproved since earlier historical sources have always shown the variations in spelling.
quiet farms and estates which eventually came under the control of the town of Westchester.*
The area saw no great military activity during the colonial period with one notable exception.

In October, 1776, during the War of Independence, British General William Howe landed a force of 4,000 redcoats at Throggs Neck in order to cut off George Washington from his supply line in Connecticut. The effort, however, was unsuccessful since Washington anticipated it. He ordered the destruction of the bridge over Westchester Creek leaving Howe delayed for six days allowing Washington time to evacuate his forces from Manhattan.16 The British landing demonstrated, in part, the deficiencies in New York harbor defenses.

The Development of the Third Coastal Defense System

After American independence the federal government attempted to create a decent system of coastal defenses; a sporadic process with mixed results. Two different “systems” emerged by the time of the War of 1812. The first system was marked by poorly placed fortification in isolated areas of poor construction and the second was inefficient. Historian Willard Robinson noted that the Second System lacked, “…depth, strong direction, and coordination.” Willard also asserted that the defenses of the Second System did not offer any effective protection since they were located too close to the places they were defending. This was demonstrated when the British sacked Washington, DC in the War of 1812. Fortifications should have intercepted invasion forces before they posed a danger to the areas they defended. New York, had these second system defenses, such as Castle Clinton, which being located directly on the southern tip of Manhattan island, was simply too close to the city. As a result, these earlier systems of defense were abandoned.17

* Westchester Town was different than the contemporary Westchester County. Westchester town’s lands were centered in what is now Westchester Square, the Bronx.
After the War of 1812, a “Third System” was developed. In theory, new protective networks would be created in the outlying areas surround the areas being guarded. An 1826 report by the Army Corps of Engineers said that this system was needed to avoid “periods of embarrassment” such as the sacking of Washington.¹⁸

In New York, a ring of defenses was conceived to defend the city. From the northern approach, the narrow gap in the waterway between Throggs Neck and Willet’s Point were identified by the Engineer Corps as an ideal place to build coastal security.¹⁹ To prepare the way for the federal government to begin construction, the New York State Legislature passed a law in 1815 that the tip of the Throggs Neck peninsula to be ceded to the Federal government.²⁰

The proposed Throggs Neck fortification had critics that argued against it based on cost and practicality. One opponent to the project was Senator Mahlon Dickerson of New Jersey. Dickerson argued that to build a defense at Throggs Neck would “throw away our money,” and said that any fleet that would attempt to gain entrance to New York from the northern approach would be stopped by “the whirlpools of Hellgate.” If that did not suffice, a small artillery battery could be quickly put in place near Hellgate to check any approach. Dickerson felt that it was “preposterous to fear that a fleet, sufficient to endanger the city of New York, would ever find its way through this passage.”²¹

Dickerson’s argument had strong points. Hellgate, the narrow channel that separates Astoria from Randall’s Island, was dangerous to sailing-craft and any large fleet would have found the approach very difficult. Only after the advent of steam ships and the construction efforts to enlarge and control Hellgate did the channel become a more practical water-route to Manhattan.
The Federal Purchase of Throggs Neck

Despite these objections, the War of 1812 still loomed large and the appropriation passed. The land at the tip of Throggs Neck was purchased from several owners, including William Bayard, a merchant of some note, Charles H. Hammond, who acted on behalf of his father, and Colonel Abijah Hammond who made a fortune through real estate in Greenwich Village. The purchase was the result of long negotiations, since Hammond (no doubt influenced by the sensibilities of his father), haggled the price. The state of New York, therefore, at the behest of the federal government, appraised the land and concluded it was worth $10,500. Despite the appraisal, Hammond demanded, and received $15,000 for the property. Cleverly, Hammond only sold the land to the government, and not the right of way onto it. Therefore, the purchase was negotiated for an additional $2,000. Hammond insisted that he was not filching the government and said that the sum, “…is a price much below what it will even be had for by appraisement, or in any other way, after it has passed into other hands.” Colonel Joseph G. Totten, who would later become a prominent Chief of Army Engineers and co-founder of the National Academy of Science, did not consider the price to be “unreasonable” but commented, “Owners and appraisers always seem to act… on the principle that it is fair to take advantage of the necessities of the general government, or on the more just ground that the damage is rather in bringing a body of soldiers, often undisciplined, into the neighborhood of the farmer, than in reducing his farm.” The final deeds were conveyed to the federal government on August 25, 1828.22

The new fort was to be named after Philip Schuyler (1733-1804); a major player in New York politics, a member of the Continental Congress and later a Major General of the
Continental Army. Schuyler was known for planning the failed invasion of Canada in 1775 as well as preparing for the defense of the colonies during the Saratoga campaign.\textsuperscript{23}

**The Construction of Fort Schuyler**

Work commenced in 1833 under the supervision of Captain I.L. Smith of the Army Corps of Engineers. The construction of the new fort proved to be a lengthy and sporadic process. By 1840, $450,000 had already been spent and another $290,000 was required for completion.\textsuperscript{24} The fort would not be ready for occupancy until 1856.

The length of time it took to build the fort was caused by location, difficulty in obtaining men, and price gouging of materials. In those days, Throggs Neck became an island at high tide. In addition, as building progressed, revisions to the structure necessitated by the land, such as a seawall, were constructed. As for manpower, availability was sporadic. For example, in 1836, a report on the progress of construction noted that the,

“…demand for mechanics has been so great… that not more than fifty masons could ever be collected; whereas two hundred were designed to be employed. Operations, in consequence have been comparatively limited, and, in addition… occasionally embarrassed by *strikes* for unreasonable prices on the part of those by whom stone was to be supplied.”\textsuperscript{25}

The skilled stone work was accomplished by New England stone masons. The grunt work was mostly done by Irish laborers. So many of these laborers came into the area, that a separate Irish community was established around 1840 called “Schuylerville” which was located in what is now the intersection of East Tremont Avenue and Bruckner Boulevard.\textsuperscript{26}

Across Long Island Sound at Willet’s Point, Fort Totten was constructed shortly after Fort Schuyler. Fort Totten, had more land and facilities than Fort Schuyler. One source
described Fort Schuyler as a, “a stepchild” to Fort Totten and that, “if Fort Schuyler wanted a new mule, Fort Totten sent over their old mule and they got a new one. If Fort Schuyler wanted a new lawn mower they got Fort Totten’s old one and Fort Totten got a new one.”

The Throggs Neck Light

Throggs Neck also had a lighthouse that for many years stood beside the fort. The light, which was set at the very tip of the peninsula, predated the construction of Fort Schuyler. The contract to build the lighthouse and a residence for its keeper was awarded to Timothy, Ezra, and Elisha Daboll. Its first light was fitted by George W. Thompson and the first keeper, Samuel Young, was appointed on December 12, 1826. The early keepers lived in isolation, and the first two keepers, Young and his successor Jeth Bayles, maintained a saloon where sailors, hunters, and soldiers would stop in by boat or ship for a drink. This was not unusual for lighthouse keepers who often had other occupations to supplement their incomes.

The lighthouse keepers also tampered with their surroundings. Young made some changes by erecting a barrier in front of the house to prevent flooding, and a barn for his cow. Even the original lighthouse did not last long. It was torn down in 1835 to facilitate construction, however, some of the original stonework of the lighthouse was incorporated into Fort Schuyler.

A second, stronger lighthouse was built. This one lasted longer and was upgraded with stronger lenses and a fog bell. In 1890, this structure was torn down and replaced with an iron skeleton tower. In 1905, the army found that the tower blocked the field of fire from the fort’s guns. Therefore, it was replaced with a new red brick tower in a different location. This one remained in place until 1934 it was replaced by another iron tower. Then in 1944, the keeper’s
position was discontinued and a metal tower replaced the older structure. The only remnant of the old lighthouse keepers is their residence, which is, as of this writing, still used by Maritime College employees. * 29

The most well-known of the keepers was the last one, Charles A Ferreira. He was born the son of Alexander and Mary Ferreira in 1873. The elder Ferreira, a Union navy veteran, was appointed the lighthouse keeper at Throggs Neck in 1884 and his son chose to follow in his footsteps and took over the position in 1910. Charlie became something of a local historian, and by the time he retired in 1944 he was considered an authority on the history of Fort Schuyler. All the same, Ferreira liked a good story and was not a trained historian. His recollections suggest exaggeration, poor dating, and lack of supporting evidence. Still, when used even-handedly he is a valuable source of information about Fort Schuyler. Interviews with Ferreira as well as his notes on the history of the fort have survived and they do provide at times a good supplementary source of information.

A Description of Fort Schuyler

Fort Schuyler is an example of a pentagonal French-bastioned fort. According to Ferreira, Fort Schuyler’s design inspired the plan of the Pentagon in Washington, DC, though there is little corroborating evidence of it.

Seaward, the fort was well protected. Three bastions, ready to handle an array of artillery overlook Long Island Sound in a general south and eastern orientation. The fort’s casemates

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* The lighthouse keeper’s house was always subject to disturbance from the guns. In one account, told by Charles Ferreira he noted that when President Hayes died in 1881, the fort gave a 21 gun salute. The vibrations from the shot knocked all the plaster off the walls in the Ferreira house and broke 19 panes of glass.
are composed of gneiss granite that was shipped from Greenwich, Connecticut by schooner. * If under fire, soldiers would be allowed ease of movement from different points of the fort through a warren of tunnels.

Two tiers of guns in the casemates faced almost every angle into Long Island Sound. The levels were connected with sets of spiraling staircases that generally turned right to give the greatest space for the defenders’ sword arms from above. 30

In the middle of the fort there is a quadrangle, called the “pentagon” due to its shape, with its entrance being to the west through a sally port. The sally port leads to a forecourt, often referred to as the “inner gorge.” It was here in the southwest, that a small dungeon was maintained to hold soldiers who were pending disciplinary action. Through the inner gorge, there was another sally port that led to a tunnel with narrow slits that soldiers could fire through, which led out over an iron-studded wooden gate and over a medieval style drawbridge. Beyond the drawbridge, there were bunker fortifications and earthworks to prevent a successful attack from the landward side.

In sum, the fort was designed to garrison 1,250 men with a total of 318 pieces of armament. This included carronades, howitzers, 42 pounders as well as various field pieces making it a formidable stronghold in its day. The gun batteries were named after notable U.S. officers such as Gansevoort and Hazard. Never were the guns fired in anger, nor was Fort Schuyler ever fired upon, except in one anecdote that may or may not be true. 31 In 1954, the New York Times published an article about the retirement of Charles Ferreira. According to the article, during World War I, Fort Totten fired a warning shot at a British freighter who had

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* Ferreira differentiated between the walls of the outer fort and the inner part. He wrote, “The stones for the outer part of the Fort came from Greenwich, Connecticut; the inner part of the Fort is white granite from Quincy, Massachusetts.” He is the only source that notes this difference.
entered into the area without showing the proper signal flags. The shell skipped off the water and, “…hit Schuyler scattering granite all over the pentagon.” The concussion of the shell knocked over the ketchup that Mrs. Ferreira “…was boiling, all over her kitchen.”

This makes a great story, but there is no primary account of this incident within the local newspapers. Also, military records of the incident could not be found. Such a story would at least make it to the local press, and so for now the story has to be judged, apocryphal.

Living Conditions at Fort Schuyler

The enlisted soldiers that lived in the fort did not have many modern amenities, even by 19th century standards. The fort was built like a rabbit warren, with a series of interconnected rooms. At least eight of these quarters were assembled into two tiers in the landward portion of the fort. Heating was achieved by fireplaces, although according to a report by Assistant Surgeon C.B. White in 1870, “…in severe winter weather it has been found necessary to resort to stoves.”

There was no indoor plumbing. Fresh water was collected from six brick-lined wells both in and outside the fort. This was later supplemented in 1869 by a 1000 gallon rain water tank. White noted, “Within 30 feet of the quarters is a shed over a well and pump, fitted up as a wash-room for the use of enlisted men. There is no bath-room connected with the quarters; in summer the men bathe in the sea. The privies for the men’s use are in a flagged yard enclosed from the parade, in front of and about 35 feet from the quarters.”

By 1877, four cast-iron bath tubs were installed which were “tolerably comfortable” in “moderate weather.”

* Other sources have indicated that the incident took place during the Spanish American War and the ship in question was a Dutch ship. - Harold Polesetsky, Undated Clipping, “Tunnels Lend Air of Mystery to Fort Schuyler.”
† In various notes by Mr. Ferreira he indicates that the ship was a British tramp freighter that was not running its lights.
other kind of amenity was a post library that contained about 800 volumes. It was a popular place since it was open at all times and was “well warmed and lighted.”

Outside of the fort, in separate wooden buildings, kitchens and messes were constructed. Additionally, separate quarters were built for laundresses and married soldiers. These buildings, described as one-story frame buildings, were near the mainland and divided into twenty-four rooms that were intended for twelve sets of quarters. Officers resided in buildings south of the main entrance.

The children of married soldiers and residents of Fort Schuyler were educated by the army. In 1868, one instructor was Private Tozer of the 1st Artillery who taught an average of 12 children. This schooling continued for the next several decades. Charles Ferreira was educated at the fort and recalled his instructor’s lackluster pedagogy:

“They set aside one room next to the soldiers’ poolroom as a schoolroom for eight kids on the base. Our teacher was a private McGloan who got $2 on top of his regular pay of $13. All he ever taught us was how to draw a map of South America.

‘Draw a map of South America,’ he would order us, ‘with all capitals and rivers thereon.’ Then he would march off to the Post Exchange and drink beer until he got locked up in the guardhouse."

Enlisted men were taught in an evening school. In addition, the Commanding Officer supervised recitations for commissioned officers, all within the library room.

Fort Schuyler and the Civil War

In the wake of the crises leading to the American Civil War, assigned to the post in January, 1861 Second Lieutenant of the Army Corp of Engineers William Cushing Paine, descendent of Robert Treat Paine, and a signer of the Declaration of Independence was the first
commander of Fort Schuyler. However, Paine did not care for the position. He wrote on January 16,

“In consequence of all these rumors afloat in the newspapers, Uncle Sam has gotten frightened, and afraid that some New York secessionists may seize the New York Forts, and so has ordered a small garrison to each. They ordered me with ten men here to Fort Schuyler, a fort which has never before had a garrison, nor even a soldier in it. There isn’t a cannon mounted or which can be used in the Fort. It seemed ridiculous to me to come here to defend it, for there is nothing to defend which could be taken away, and I have no means of doing so if it should be attacked. However, I had to obey orders and come.”

Paine’s ten men were not ideal soldiers. Three of them were transferred as prisoners to Fort Columbus after a court martial and three more including a sergeant, were charged with desertion.

Paine’s impatience grew after the outbreak of the war. He wrote on May 7, “I am getting rapidly tired of staying here… I think it is outrageous to keep an Engineering Officer shut up here in charge of 10 Recruits when war is going on.” Finally, in June or July of that year he was reassigned to General Dix’s Department in Baltimore.

The Fort was used by the Union as a basic training center and mustering ground. Regiments gathered at Fort Schuyler such as Colonel Edward D. Baker’s Regiment of California Volunteers, Adams’s ‘Brooklyn Phalanx,’ and the exotically dressed Zouave Regiment of Colonel Abram Duryée. Duryée’s Regiment was the New York 5th Volunteer Infantry. The term “Zouave” stems from native African troops that served the French in the 1830s. Their style of colorful uniforms and drills had been imported by Duryée. The New York Times wrote on May 5, 1861,

“The garrison of Fort Schuyler is ready to take the field on very short notice. It was just two weeks Thursday since Col. Duryea [sic] commenced raising his Regiment. Probably no body of raw recruits was ever brought together and advanced to such a high degree of military proficiency as this command has attained in so short a time before. Since they have been at Fort Schuyler, the men have been subjected to very rigid discipline, and any
one skilled in the science of war, who shall pay them a visit, will be surprised at the precision with which they execute some of the most intricate battalion movements. Maneuvers which we have seen performed by militia regiments of long standing with far less accuracy.”

The same article also noted, “The first gun ever [fired] from Fort Schuyler was discharged by the direction of Col. Duryea, on Tuesday [April 30]. A small brass field piece has been mounted on the ramparts, and with it, at sunset; the flag is regularly saluted as it is lowered.”

The permanent garrison at Fort Schuyler remained relatively small during the Civil War ranging anywhere from 50 to 150 men. Starting in 1863, the garrison became the wardens of approximately 500 Confederate prisoners. Fort Schuyler was but one of several prison camps in New York that included Rikers Island, Governors Island and Harts Island. There was some objection to setting up the prison at Fort Schuyler because of space requirements. They eventually developed a scheme to refit the casemates with bunks to hold about 36 prisoners per casemate. Auxiliary buildings were constructed; and windows and gates were sealed. The whole affair did have some danger to it as was pointed out by Colonel W. Hoffman,

“There are two guns mounted in each casemate which cannot be removed, and their carriages would be exposed to malicious injury by the prisoners even with every precaution to guard against it. The floors being of wood and very dry the prisoners would have it in their power to set fire to them and destroy the fort in spite of any vigilance on the part of the guards. A more weighty objection perhaps is the fact that it would be to a certain extent disarming the fort and thereby very much weakening the defense of the city of New York.”

Despite Hoffman’s anxieties, the work was done and there were no recorded incidents of mischief with one exception. Ferreira notes that he heard second-hand that a rebel prisoner was shot after repeatedly attempting to escape. The story is plausible although there are no primary sources to support it.
McDougall General Hospital

A military hospital where Union soldiers were treated was opened in October, 1862 just northwest of the fort and on the peninsula, named McDougall General Hospital. The hospital, planned and organized by Assistant-Surgeon Robert Bartholomew, was named in honor of Charles McDougall, U.S. Army surgeon and later general. The hospital was spread into separate buildings along an oblong corridor. From the center of this corridor were longhouse-shaped pavilions (up to 147 feet in length) where the injured and sick would stay. At the north end of the corridor were the administrative buildings. At the south end were the kitchen, laundry and other support facilities. In the center of the grounds were a chapel, fountain, guardhouse, and an operating room. The entire ground was connected vis-à-vis a miniature railway that carried food, medicine, and other goods throughout the facility. The total capacity of the hospital was 1,660 beds.48

Many of the wounded that came to Fort Schuyler were sent back to the front lines. Others, who were too infirmed, entered into the Veterans Corps (originally “Invalid Corps”). These men were given light duties before eventual dismissal. Seventy such men were transferred from McDougall. Some members of this group ended up serving at the Fort Schuyler post.49 According to government statistics, 11,957 troops (both white and black) stayed at the hospital. Of these, 547 died.50

The hospital was praised by professional organizations. For example, The Sanitary Reporter in 1864 wrote,

“The general hospital at Fort Schuyler is admirable in plan and locale, and this latter condition is found to be of vast importance. A rebel battery, with an incurable habit of using hospitals as a target, would scarcely be so dangerous as a low, water-sogged clayey soil, with its inevitable results of fever, rheumatism, and bowel complaints.”51
With that said, one inspector noted that, “The want of water is a very serious objection. The well in the area formerly good has, at last, become brackish: as have also three outside wells. This is a source of much complaint on the part of the patients, good drinking water being only obtainable from the Fort, and that in limited quantity.”

Women who wished to help the Union war effort, were employed at McDougall as nurses. One such nurse was Susan E. Alger of Worcester, who worked at the hospital for seven months. She worked at a busy ward of fifty beds which constantly kept her occupied. One writer noted, “Though they were men of many nations, and though some were coarse and rough in manners, they never uttered an unkind word to their nurses and were always thankful of favors.” After Alger’s service, tragedy struck, as her son, who was in the fighting, was captured and died at a Confederate prisoner of war camp.53

Alger recalled Thanksgiving at the Hospital where the nurses were permitted to eat with the men,

“Those too weak to be at the table, sat or lay on their cots. As I took my seat, waiting for the steward to dish out tea and coffee, and saw crippled men on my right and on my left in tears, I spoke to change the scene, for my heart was sad, as my own son was I knew not where. Some of us said, ‘This is a new Thanksgiving to us,’ and some of the men said it was over a year since they had sat at table with a lady; and now their soldier mother, they were reminded of loved ones at home. The absence of my son was all that prevented it being the happiest Thanksgiving I ever spent.”54

The hospital was managed separately from Fort Schuyler and was typically not considered under its command. However, in 1863 a point of dispute emerged between Assistant-Surgeon Warren Webster, who administered the hospital, and the army. On November 15th General Edward Canby, commander of the city and harbor of New York ordered Brigadier-General Harvey Brown, who was then the commanding officer at Fort Schuyler to arrest a Private Phillip Fitzsimmons for desertion. Fitzsimmons, however, had just undergone surgery,
and Webster (believing that the recovering private was too injured to move) notified General Brown that since General Hospitals were under the control of the Surgeon-General he would only release Fitzsimmons at the behest of his medical director. For this, Webster was court-martialed and found guilty. He was sentenced to six-months confinement to his post later reduced to six days because of his good service. Webster went on to direct other hospitals.\textsuperscript{55}

McDougall Hospital ceased operations on September 16, 1865, suffered a major fire and was demolished within a few years.\textsuperscript{56}

The Hicks Murder

After the Civil War, the garrison at Fort Schuyler was reduced to about 100 soldiers. The fort was a quiet place and while the soldiers never saw action, they were at times called out into the local community for assistance in emergencies, such as fires.\textsuperscript{57}

This is not to say that relations were always harmonious between the residents of Throggs Neck and Fort Schuyler. In the early morning of Thursday, August 2, 1866 a group of Irish active and inactive soldiers which included John R. Doran, John C. Burke, his brother, Charles Burke, and Michael Matin (all of Company H) snuck out of the fort and went out to the town of West Chester\textsuperscript{*}. The evening consisted of a night at Michael Murray’s Public House, playing cards, and becoming intoxicated.

The drunken soldiers got into an altercation with a couple of men from Schuylerville who refused to drink with them. Of the two, one was an immigrant named Alexander Elliott; who owned of a saloon and bakery in the area. Elliott came from Northern Ireland and the soldiers were “Fenians,” part of a fraternal organization that supported complete Irish independence.\textsuperscript{58} Harsh words were exchanged on both sides and a melee ensued.\textsuperscript{59} Elliott, his wagon damaged in

\textsuperscript{*} The town of Westchester was centered around what is now Westchester Square.
the brawl, fled on foot to his house in the rainy night. The soldiers pursued him, caught him, and beat him with an iron bar breaking his right arm. Elliott was saved only after he called out for help. Richard Hicks, a relative, and Nicholas Foltz, a baker who worked for Elliot, came to his assistance.60

The soldiers returned to the fort but discovered that one of the Burke brothers was missing. They then got an ambulance and rode out of Fort Schuyler, taking with them a bugler and Corporal, Thomas Fitzgerald; described as a “noble, intellectual-looking young person with a pleasant countenance.” The group took weapons with them, but according to the report, only Fitzgerald had an armed musket.61

The soldiers tracked Elliott to his house where they vented their anti-Ulsterian views and cried, “Murder the Orange…”62 They stormed the house while Fitzgerald remained outside. Elliott watched the whole affair and was initially restrained by his mother. However, when they entered his house, he cursed at the “Fenians” and leapt out the second story window. He escaped into the night crossing the Westchester Creek.63

While this was going on, next door, Elliott’s cousin, Ellen Hicks, along with her mother and sister were drawn out by the noise and came to the doorway to watch the proceedings. After Elliott fled, the soldiers gave up and turned to go back. However, in a parting shot, Fitzgerald took aim at Hicks and shot her in the abdomen. She died shortly thereafter.64 The incident was even more tragic since Hicks was to be married within a few days. Immediately after the shooting, rumors abounded that there was a mutiny at Fort Schuyler.65 Fitzgerald, was arrested the next morning. He asserted, however, he did not intend to murder the girl but rather to frighten her. 66
The incident spilled out into the press. Some gave sympathy to the soldiers such as an anonymous ‘Westchester’ who wrote to the New York Times and contended that the soldiers were subjected to “unwarranted abuse.”67 ‘Westchester’ provided further details of the incident such as referring to Elliott as a “pugilist of considerable note” and that the soldiers went to a “Fenian meeting” prior to going to the saloon. According to the writer, “To enable them to do this, a sergeant and a corporal, who had charge of the guard, under the officer of the day, put such men on post (Fenians) as would permit them to pass without challenge.” ‘Westchester’ also noted that these men were raw recruits and “that more trouble has not arisen is a matter of surprise.”68

Elliott read the letter by Westchester and responded with his own. He denied being a “Pugilist of considerable note.” In addition, he questioned the discipline of the army and how could “deserters from the army” be “allowed to come and go as they like, mix with the men, get drunk together, go to a garrisoned fort, and led by the sergeant of the night and the corporal of the picket guard, procure arms and ammunition, take an ambulance and go off and do whatsoever their passions incite them to.”69

Fitzgerald went to trial December 3, 1866 and subsequently found guilty of first degree murder on December 6.70 He was sentenced to be hung on January 25. There were, however, multiple stays in the case as it went through appeal; where there was a question as to what degree of murder should be applied.71

Fitzgerald’s companions were convicted of being accessories to the crime with two of them being held in prison for almost two years without a trial. Eventually, Fitzgerald’s death sentence was commuted to life in prison, and the others’ sentences were reduced as well.72
According to the *New York Times*, this was most likely due to urging by citizens of Westchester, the jury, and Associate Justices.\(^7^3\)

**Modifications and Prohibitions**

Perhaps in part because of the bad press from the Hicks murder, but more likely due to the outmoded fortifications, the army abandoned the fort in 1870 only to be reoccupied in 1877 when they resolved to modernize it. This was a response to the enlarged Hell Gate which was now expanded so that larger ships could more easily navigate the channel. New weapons were brought in, including modern ‘disappearing guns,’ and a causeway was erected in 1882 over the marshy area that separated the federal reservation from the mainland at high tide. This causeway increased the federal territory by another 7 acres for a total of 59.

During this period, the U.S. army also filled several chambers with sand and sealed them with concrete. These chambers later became a mystery and the college president in the 1950’s, Calvin Durgin, ordered their excavation. When the sand was discovered, there was speculation as to their purpose. Some theories suggested that the sand rooms would stabilize the fort when the great 18 inch guns were fired or they were the result of busy work with soldiers being ordered to carry sand into the fort so they would stay out of trouble to keep soldiers out of trouble. Fred Hess has his own theory and suggested the sand was used to support the brickwork of the great vaulted ceilings while the mortar dried.\(^7^4\)

The most likely reason for these sand rooms was described by the college newspaper, the *Porthole*, in 1950. Where in 1885, the army laid an electric minefield into Long Island Sound. The detonation controls were placed within the fort near an ammunition dump and a mine vault.
To protect the control room and the explosives kept in the dump and vault, they filled the adjacent rooms with sand to absorb the shock of an artillery barrage.\textsuperscript{75}

**Temperance**

Fort Schuyler had maintained a canteen on the post for the soldiers, but towards the end of the nineteenth century the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (WTCU) urged banning alcohol sales on military property. There was general concern that soldiers were wasting their money on drink and debauchery. For example, on August 1, 1878, the *Brooklyn Eagle* reported that one Fort Schuyler soldier by the name of James Ahearn attempted suicide by shooting himself in the head with a Derringer revolver on Broome Street in New York City after receiving considerable back pay and a ten days furlough. He spent all his money in the, “questionable resorts on Thompson street” and after waking up, found himself penniless and disgusted.\textsuperscript{76}

The WTCU’s pressure succeeded and the army forbade sales in 1901, prohibition ran in the face of soldierly custom. In response to this, soldiers at Fort Schuyler began to go off the reservation for their drink and overindulge. According to one report, the soldiers would,

“…always get more than one or two glasses, for the saloon keepers of Westchester are very willing to trust them and allow them to run a bill until the end of the month. The result is, that not being under the restraint that was enforced at the canteen, they lose control of themselves, spend all their money, or incur a debt and finally land in the guardhouse with a court-martial to face, a fine to pay, and no more furloughs.”

This resulted in forty court-martials in the space of a month.\textsuperscript{77}

The men went “crazy” and according to one sergeant, “Why they’re changed men entirely, and proof of this assertion is that some of the best of them have gone off and got crazy drunk just for the sake of doing so.” Another sergeant remarked, “What the men don’t like about this matter is their being dictated to by a lot of women cranks… A man could spend about
$3 a month at the canteen, but now they go out and spend every cent of their wages. In my opinion the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union has been playing right into the hands of the saloonkeepers, who are now reaping a golden harvest at the soldiers’ expense.” 78

In one anecdote, a soldier who had a clean record prior to the alcohol boycott, went to Westchester village, drank all his money away, and was thrown out. On his way back, he stopped at a saloon owned by a man named Nolan. He demanded drink. When it was refused, “…he began to break glassware. Nolan got down a shotgun and fired it at the drink-crazed soldier, fortunately missing him.” 79

By the next month, the drunken protest died off. One officer noted,

“The men find it a bad way to protest against no canteen. Were a vote taken to-day here it would be unanimous for the canteen. But many of the offenders have been heavily fined and others have been deprived of privileges and put on fatigue duty, and they think twice about four miles and a half to drink liquor and get into trouble. Besides, five court-martials mean a grand court-martial and dishonorable discharge, and that checks some.”

By the next month, there were no reported incidents although liquor was still occasionally smuggled in. 80

**Decline and Abandonment**

As time passed, the post became obsolete and the garrison was reduced in 1911 to only a dozen men. Indeed, a contemporary Bronx historian noted, “The fort has proved to be too old fashioned to be of further use, and reliance for attack and defence has been placed in the more modern fortifications at the eastern entrance of the Sound at Fisher’s Island.” 82

It was a great place to be assigned, since two sergeants in command, Ernest Seifert and Richard Stoecker as well as a dozen soldiers had the beach and private residences to themselves. The batteries of guns were still operational. Stoecker commented, “They are ready right now for
any emergency. The only thing being missing is the gunners.” A private noted to the *New York Times* that to make the post the most popular in the army were a lawn mower and a brass band. It may be that due to the reduction in men the grass was overgrown and the evenings dull.\(^{83}\)

It was in this half-abandoned state that the deteriorated fort became a favorite outing destination. Day-trippers would make their way to the village of Westchester and take the “most beautiful three-mile walk in the vicinity of Manhattan.”\(^{84}\) The view and dilapidated fort also attracted the attention of the motion picture industry which began to use the location in the 1910’s.

Charles Ferreira recalled that the companies that used Fort Schuyler as a location at this time were Biograph and Edison Studios. Silent films that starred Mary Pickford and Norma Talmadge were filmed at the Fort. Ferreira was used by the movie studio to help with the special effects, “I accidentally burned myself while setting fire to an old shed for one of the scenes.”\(^{85}\) Later films were *The Hummingbird, Wages of Virtue, and Her Love Story*, that starred Gloria Swanson and *The Girl Habit* with Charles Ruggles.\(^{86}\) These early movies were the beginning of a long tradition of film making at Fort Schuyler.

Although the military still controlled the reserve, it had fallen into disrepair because it was never actively maintained. The fort was transferred from department to department until 1931 when the Headquarters and Services Platoon Company A, took over the property in order to make fire control maps of New York.

Around this time, the Army put Fort Schuyler on its abandoned list. It was then that the authorities of the New York State Merchant Marine Academy were notified about its availability. A contentious fight for the property between the academy and Robert Moses was waged in which Moses wished to turn Fort Schuyler into a public park, as described in chapter 6. Since
that time, Fort Schuyler has been well-maintained and is always a source of interest to
architecture and history enthusiasts.

1 “Legendary Tunnel of 1862 Traced at Fort Totten,” Daily Brooklyn Eagle. June 17, 1937. Taken from an extract in the Stephen B. Luce Library Archives.
3 Hess, Fort Schuyler and Me, 15.
6 Email from Brendan Thompson to Richard Corson, “Fort Schuyler Mystery Tunnels.”
9 Ultan, 31.
10 Ultan, 31-33.
12 Ultan, 33-34.
14 Ultan, 34.
15 Ultan, 35.
19 Records of War Dept. MFI pg. 1. – Source Hoverter notes. – Stephen B. Luce Library Archives.
20 Records of War Dept. MFI. 1.
21 Register of Debates in Congress Comprising the Leading Debates and Incidents of the First Session of the Nineteenth Congress. Washington: Gales & Seaton, 1826. 794-795.
22 “Relative to the Purchase of Throg’s Point, on Long Island, for a Fortification.” Military Affairs, V. 3, 1823-1828, 224-227.
30 Ibid.
34 Ibid.
35 Records of War Dept. MF I pg. 72.
37 Ibid, 41.
42 Ibid.
43 Ibid.
45 *The War of the Rebellion*, 421.
46 Ibid, 687.
47 Ferreira, 8.
49 Ferreira.
50 Records of the War Dept MF I pg. 5.
51 “Scenes in Hospitals.” *Sanitary Reporter*. March 15, 1864. http://books.google.com/books?id=Z4gCAAAAYAAJ&dq=mcdougall%20hospital%20schuyler&lr&as_drb=0&as_minn=0&as_miny=1855&as_maxm=0&as_maxy=1890&as_brr=1&pg=PA161#v=onepage&q=schuyler&f=false
52 Report of Dr. Lyman, as cited in Record of War Depart. MF I, pg. 4.
Ibid.
56 Records of War Dept MF I pg. 4
57 Ferreira.
62 Twomey, 38.
68 Ibid.
69 Ibid.
70 Ibid.
72 Twomey, 38.
74 Hess, 16.
75 Porthole march 24, 1950
76 “Attempted Suicide,” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*. August 1, 1878.
78 Ibid.
79 Ibid.
81 “No-Canteen System has another Trial,” *New York Times*. June 16, 1901.
82 Cook, 126.
85 Ferreira, 13.
86 Ibid.