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Seeking a Safe Harbor: The Acquisition and Reconstruction of Fort Schuyler by the New York State Merchant Marine Academy (1927-1938)

Joseph A. Williams

Abstract

Using archival sources, this article discusses the acquisition and reconstruction of Fort Schuyler, The Bronx, by the New York State Merchant Marine Academy (SUNY Maritime College). It discusses the role of Superintendent James H. Tomb and the political struggle with Robert Moses to control the grounds. Construction efforts under the New Deal are also detailed.

James H. Tomb

In 1927, James Harvey Tomb became the Superintendent and Commanding Officer of the New York Nautical School. The school, the forerunner of SUNY Maritime College, was based entirely aboard the gunship *Newport*. The ship, berthed at Bedloe's (Liberty) Island, represented an ongoing tradition of merchant marine training that began in 1874. However, by the time Tomb took command, the school was in need of modernization and a permanent land base.

Tomb was a navy man by birth. *The New Orleans States* described him on July 8, 1932: "He's a sea-dog of the doggiest type. . . tall, heavy-set, red-cheeked, and with a voice like a fog horn. He went through Annapolis and did his stuff in the navy, and he's the fightingest enthusiast for the merchant marine you ever saw."

After a lengthy naval career in which he saw action in the Spanish-American War, the Filipino insurrection, and the Boxer Rebellion, he retired from the Navy in 1926 after appointment to several commands. He then briefly served as Marine Superintendent of the Panama Canal before becoming Superintendent of the New York Nautical School.¹

Tomb was strict, but had an ironic sense of humor. This is illustrated in an incident recalled by Cadet Edward “Nick” Carter who referred to him as “Blubby”:

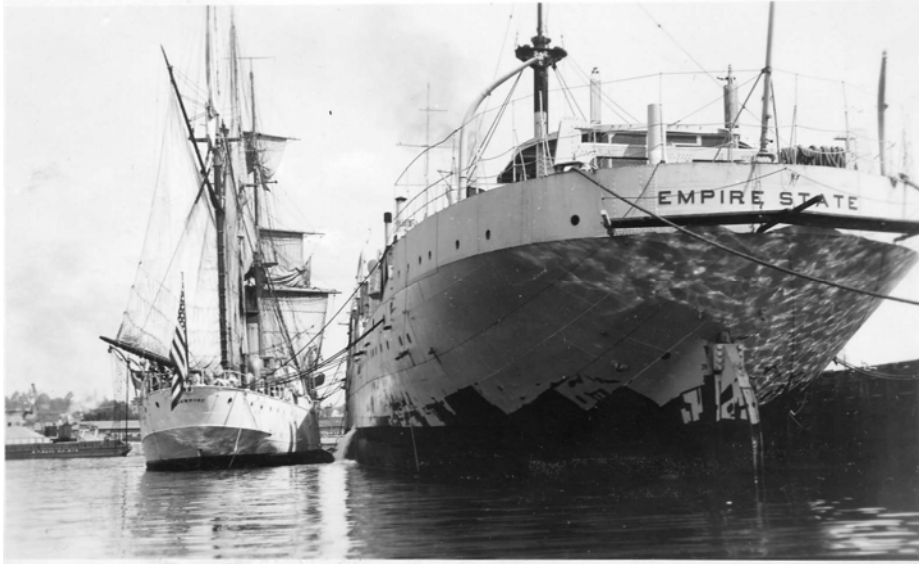
. . . several of us were detailed to remove [a] safe from the skipper’s [Tomb’s] office... We got the [safe] up on the spar deck via the cabin skylight and a tackle on the spanker boom and were waiting for the new one to be delivered. Amusing ourselves while waiting, one of the boys played ‘Jimmy Valentine’ with the combination dial, and to the surprise of all, the tumblers fell and the door could be opened. Just at that instant ‘Blubby’ came on deck and while we shivered at the thought of what would happen to us, he merely commented, ‘That proves that I needed a new safe.’²

Even though Tomb was not a merchant mariner, he embraced his new position with gusto. He served as head of the school from 1927 to 1942 before becoming the first Superintendent of the federal Merchant Marine Academy at Kings Point, Long Island.

Tomb prioritized modernizing the New York Nautical School. He had three main goals. First, he wanted to change the name of the school so that it reflected its mission of producing professional merchant sea officers. This was accomplished in 1929 when the school was renamed the New York State Merchant Marine Academy.³

His second goal was to obtain a new training ship. The *Newport*, launched in 1896, was a sail-steam hybrid. By the late 1920s, sail was obsolete. In an interview, Tomb commented, “We haven’t time for sails anymore. We have to teach our young men too many things in addition to seamanship. We have to teach them ship’s business, maritime law, economics, a whole general education. Sails just get in the way.”⁴

This second goal was achieved in 1931 when the school obtained the *Procyon*, which was renamed *Empire State*.⁵ With a new ship and a new name, Tomb focused on his third goal: to obtain a permanent shore base for the school at Fort Schuyler at the tip of Throggs Neck in The Bronx.



The *Empire State* and the *Newport* side by side, circa 1931
Courtesy of the Stephen B. Luce Library, SUNY Maritime College

The need for a land base was evident. The school was docked at Bedloe's Island and borrowed the military facilities there. Tomb wrote: "I was much impressed with the lack of modern facilities available. . . The schoolship [was] berthing at an old wooden pier on the southern side of [Bedloe's] island which was badly in need of repairs."⁶

Tomb's first move, in 1929, was to relocate the ship to the Brooklyn Navy Yard.⁷ Another corrective action was taken when the school obtained a schooner hulk named the *Gilford D. Pendleton*. The hulk, renamed the *Annex*, was converted into a floating classroom and dormitory.⁸ To Tomb, this was a temporary solution. He wrote that the *Annex*, was a "godsend but inadequate." Conditions were unhealthy, ". . . colds, flue [sic] and pneumonia were common..."⁹

Fort Schuyler

Fort Schuyler as a potential site for a shore base was brought to Tomb's attention in 1928 through a meeting with a man named David Collins, whom Tomb knew through the New York Yacht Club. Collins introduced Tomb to his father-in-law, Leonor F. Loree, a railroad executive, who was also the president of the New York Chamber of Commerce. Loree, with insider knowledge, informed Tomb that the U.S. Army planned on putting Fort Schuyler on their

abandoned list. The fort and its grounds, which belonged to the federal government since 1826, had long been considered obsolete for modern coastal defense. Since at least 1911 the fort had fallen into disrepair, and was only minimally maintained.¹⁰

When Tomb brought this to the attention of the school's Board of Visitors they said that Fort Schuyler was an "ideal site" for a shore base.¹¹ Fort Schuyler made good sense. Not only was it close to New York Harbor, but they would be able to get it for a fraction of the price compared to privately held properties along the New York waterfront. This was a serious consideration, since the budget of the school was modest and did not allow for the purchase of property.

Before negotiations for the fort could even begin, however, the situation twisted, as the War Department removed Fort Schuyler from the abandoned list and planned to convert it into a military prison. With Fort Schuyler unavailable, the school continued to hunt for other property. They examined sites in Queens as well as Long Island at Lloyd Neck and Cold Spring Harbor, but these sites were not obtainable or adequate due to either price, conditions, or political machinations.¹²

By 1931, the Army dropped its plan and once again placed Fort Schuyler on the abandoned list. According to Robert Caro, author of the monumental biography of Robert Moses, *The Power Broker*, this was done at the behest of Governor Franklin D. Roosevelt who prodded, "the army to close the base and turn the land over to the state." Caro asserted that one of Roosevelt's pet projects was to bring the Academy to land at Fort Schuyler. The situation, however, grew complex when the New York City Parks Department under Moses, decided to try to obtain Fort Schuyler and convert it into a public park.¹³

The reason for the Parks Department's interest was linked to the general expansion of parks throughout the city under Moses. When Fort Schuyler was listed abandoned, they were already in negotiations to purchase and convert the property at Ferry Point, about a mile distant from the fort, into a marine park. With the country in the midst of the Great Depression, the New York Park Association, led by Nathan Straus, Jr., the son of New York department store mogul Nathan Straus,¹⁴ adopted Moses's suggestion and identified Fort Schuyler as an excellent supplement for the Ferry Point project that could be obtained for a minimal cost.¹⁵

The Battle for the Fort

On June 4, 1932, the War Department notified Congress that they were ready to give up Fort Schuyler and issue a five-year lease. The War Department recommended a compromise. They would divide the property between the school and the Parks Department. The Academy would receive 20 acres at the tip of the Throggs Neck peninsula, including the actual fortifications, and the Parks Department would receive the other thirty.¹⁶

The immediate result of this suggestion was a division of opinion into two camps. First, there was the park side, which rejected the compromise and wanted to have the entire property designated for parkland. The other side supported the Academy and backed the proposal as issued by the War Department.

This division was shown in the stances of Bronx civic organizations. For example, the Bronx Board of Trade supported the school. They stated: "By having the Academy located there, the Bronx would gain worldwide fame and at the same time will provide the State Merchant Marine students with a suitable site for their land activities."¹⁷

On the other hand, the Bronx Chamber of Commerce, which originally backed the school, now changed sides under the leadership of George F. Mand. Mand explained that to share the property with the Academy would be "... depriving residents of this needed park space--when there are so many sites for the Academy and none that are suitable for parks."¹⁸ Mand also charged that in the proposed division of the property, that the Academy was "... being offered the best portion of the land."¹⁹

Shortly after Mand's comments, Straus started campaigning to win public support for a Fort Schuyler park. On June 24, 1932, Straus went to Fort Schuyler and had a meeting with representatives from 36 civic and welfare organizations. He said:

A few well-meaning, well-intentioned people want to take these fifty-two acres, the finest waterfront peninsula in the greater city, to train a few boys to become officers and sailors in the merchant marine. They want to take this land from the people of one of the most rapidly growing sections of the city to be used by from 300 to 400 boys a year. If this land is made a park it will be used by from 300,000 to 400,000 people every week-end during the summer months.²⁰

Straus noted that they needed to correct the lack of foresight by the “City Fathers of past generations, who left the children of sections of the lower east side to bake through the summer months in parkless miles of pavement and stone.”²¹

Tomb felt that Straus’s argument was disingenuous:

The campaign was not fair as Mr. Straus concentrated the attention of the public on the lack of park facilities on the Manhattan lower east side, where parks for the poor were badly needed. The distance from the slums of the lower east side to Fort Schuyler is 17 miles via subway and bus, round trip fare 20¢ per person, taking 3 hours for the round trip. Transportation to the large Pelham Bay Park, reached by the subway, costs only 10¢ round trip. One-sixth of the total area of the Bronx, including streets, was in parks, an area out of all proportion...²²



Captain James Harvey Tomb, circa 1940

Courtesy of the Stephen B. Luce Library, SUNY Maritime College

In the meanwhile, Mand wrote a letter to Governor Franklin D. Roosevelt noting that the Bronx Park Commissioner came out in support of Straus’s proposition. According to Tomb, Mand’s letter was taken by Roosevelt’s secretary without his knowledge, and brought to Robert

Moses. Moses drafted a letter of reply that was naturally favorable to the parks' advocates. Roosevelt then signed this as a matter of course without realizing what content was in the response.²³ The letter read:

I agree with you that this would be a most desirable location for a shore-front recreation area and that it is much more important to use this area for municipal recreation purposes than to make it the headquarters for the New York State Merchant Marine Academy, which can be well taken care of with a smaller and cheaper piece of land somewhere outside of the city limits.²⁴

Park proponents used this letter to bolster their cause. When Roosevelt found out what happened he ordered his secretary to give all Fort Schuyler correspondence to the State Education Department instead.²⁵ The matter got more muddled when Roosevelt came out in support of the shared-lease plan as originally proposed by the War Department. Roosevelt did not disclose the details of the prior letter mishandling, probably believing it would be more embarrassing to show the internal division in his administration than to look like he flip-flopped. This made the situation even more explosive.²⁶

In the summer of 1932, maritime interests argued strongly for the Academy. For example, Emmett J. McCormack, the president of New York's Maritime Association, cited the necessity of a well-trained merchant marine for prosperity and a strong economy:

. . . the value of our merchant marine, for defensive purposes in case of war, is largely conditioned upon the efficiency of its officer personnel, and it is only through such institutions as the New York State Merchant Marine Academy, properly equipped and maintained, that this can be provided.²⁷

Mand responded to McCormack:

. . . it is not clear to us why they have not heretofore interested themselves in that neglected institution but we believe the people of the Bronx will resent having the [Maritime] Exchange tell them what their public recreational need is or should be. No community can have too many parks, and we only have to look around Manhattan to verify this statement.²⁸

Straus, meanwhile, attacked the school by citing its high cost:

The Merchant Marine Academy has an enrollment of 135 students. The total appropriation for the Merchant Marine Academy in the New York State budget for 1932 is \$85,365. The United States Government contributes \$25,000 as we understand it, in addition. Moreover, the expense of keeping in repair the *Empire State*, the training ship, amounted last year to approximately \$70,000. The total cost, therefore, to maintain the Academy for one year is in excess of \$180,000. This means that the cost to the taxpayer of graduating each student after a two-year course is more than \$1,200.²⁹

Straus added there were no job opportunities for merchant mariners by citing statistics published by the U.S. Shipping Bureau: “[the] number of licensed merchant marine officers available exceeds the maximum possible number of jobs in the ratio of two and one-half to one.”³⁰

As an alternative for the Academy, Straus suggested Clason Point, just to the west of Ferry Point. He noted that it could be obtained for \$220,000 with a down payment and the rest paid when the funds became available.³¹ But neither party was willing or able to obtain Clason Point. It was an obvious red herring. Tomb wrote: “. . . the State would not assume the great expense for such a purchase.”³² This was a reasonable assumption. The school historically had tight budgets and limited aid. It seemed unlikely that the State would support such a purchase.

Some newspapers took sides and those that did typically supported the park position. The *New York Times* wrote: “It can hardly be disputed that the city needs the Fort Schuyler reservation for a park. . . There is very little land left for parks within the city. . . The waters are as yet free from pollution, which cannot be said of some of the municipal bathing beaches.”³³ The *Daily News* wrote: “Something similar to Jones Beach, on a smaller scale, could be worked out there.”³⁴

The newspaper that gave the most consistent and ongoing support to the park side, however, was the *Bronx Home News*. In July 1932, they editorialized:

Fort Schuyler is the best possible location for a marine park in the Bronx. If the entire reservation is turned over to the City for park purposes, Bronxites will not have to go to Westchester County where, it seems, they are not welcomed any too cordially, nor will they have to travel to far-away beaches on Long Island.³⁵

To add to this, important alumni from the Academy argued against obtaining a shore base. Chief among these were former superintendents, Thomas W. Sheridan and Felix Riesenbergh. Sheridan stated:

I think that those who favor an Academy ashore do not fully comprehend just what kind of a career they are about to prepare the sea-seeking youth who would attend it. . . The training and education should be done aboard a cruising ship, and therefore I think that if any governmental agency is going to do this the State training ship should. . .³⁶

Sheridan also stated that by obtaining a land base it would continue to increase the costs of the Academy which might eventually lead to dissolution of the school.³⁷ These published views hurt Tomb's cause and were used by editorialists to question the assumption that a land base was even necessary.³⁸

According to Tomb, during the summer of 1932, opinion swayed in favor of the park project. This was abetted when the *Empire State* was on its annual cruise and Tomb could not advocate for the school. When the *Empire State* returned, he found the Academy's position shaky.³⁹

Meanwhile, the row over Fort Schuyler had not gone unnoticed by the War Department. On August 19, 1932, Patrick J. Hurley, the Secretary of War, noted that they did not have a preference as to who controlled it, but wanted to know in advance what was to be done. Hurley stated that New York was looking "a gift horse in the mouth." The War Department warned that if they did not settle the affair, they might take the land back.⁴⁰

In September 1932, proponents of the Academy intensified efforts. McCormack, of the Maritime Association, sent an open letter to Hurley that called upon granting Fort Schuyler to the Academy:

Modern methods of education are as essential in the maritime field as in any other profession... There is such complexity in engineering, terminal operation, maritime law and economies in the operation of modern merchant ships, that education along modern lines is imperative to enable us to obtain maximum results.⁴¹

McCormack noted that private funds would be solicited to help build up the school, "It is planned. . . with private endowment to provide these facilities. . . This shore base is in line with

marine school bases established in Germany, England, Japan and other countries where the necessity for such education is recognized.”⁴²

Tomb, meanwhile, sought to enlist naval support by publishing an article in the *U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings*. In it, Tomb defended the need for a land base and advocated for the expansion of merchant marine officer training. Tomb likened the New York Merchant Marine Academy to federal military institutions. He wrote that no person would “dispute the value of the Naval Academy at Annapolis.” He also concentrated on the economic value of the Academy in military terms. Tomb wrote that well trained officers were needed to “operate their ships with maximum economy and efficiency in the battle for foreign trade.”⁴³

In November, a delegation of park proponents, including New York City Mayor Joseph McKee, went to Washington for a conference with the War Department. The meeting must not have gone well for park advocates. After the conference, the War Department telephoned Tomb and asked if the Academy could use the entire site. Tomb jumped on it and sought the Education Department’s approval.⁴⁴

It was clear that the Academy’s approach to make their argument directly to the War Department was working. They emphasized the value of the Academy for military and federal purposes. The War Department was more sympathetic to an Academy that could produce a pool of cadets for the Naval Reserve, than a local park. Nevertheless, public squabbling continued as winter neared.

Interestingly, in early December 1932, the Old Timers Association of the Bronx proposed something new--a hospital. They stated: “Bronx hospitals are overcrowded and that the installation of a hospital on the Fort Schuyler site would be in the interests of humanity.”⁴⁵ This particular argument gained no traction and quickly fell out of discussion.

Then, in mid-December, Hurley informed McKee that a five-year lease had been drawn up and approved by the War Department. It designated the site as entirely controlled by the Academy.⁴⁶ The lease was sent to Governor Roosevelt for execution. It seemed like a victory for the Academy.

The controversy, however, was hardly over. Roosevelt, now President-Elect, was a lame-duck governor. Tomb was told that they would have to wait on Herbert Lehman, the Governor-

Elect, to sign the lease. Tomb attempted, but failed, to obtain a meeting with him. It probably did not help that Lehman's brother was married to the sister of Nathan Straus, Jr.⁴⁷

Despite the agreement that the lease signing would wait for Lehman, on December 29, 1932, Roosevelt signed it anyway. The reason why Roosevelt signed the lease is uncertain. Lehman was quoted by the *Bronx Home News*": "The signing by Gov. Roosevelt. . . was due to a misunderstanding, but all this can be straightened out."⁴⁸ If this misunderstanding was intentional or not, is a question that needs further study, but when considering the antagonistic relationship between Roosevelt and Moses, it may be speculated that Roosevelt wanted to make one last parting shot at Moses before becoming president. A less interesting explanation is that Roosevelt signed it as he signed Moses' letter, as an error in the course of business.

Regardless of the reasons why Roosevelt signed the lease, Lehman was initially not in support of the Academy. To make the school's position worse, the State Education Department informed Tomb that the lease Roosevelt signed was void since the New York law that established the school stipulated that it had to "operate on board ship" and did not provide for a shore base.⁴⁹

With the lease effectively invalid and a new Governor that had familial connections with a leading park advocate, the situation for the Academy was unfavorable. Tomb, however, went on the offensive. His strategy had three parts.

Tomb's strategy was to first to change the law so that the school could operate on land as well as water. Second, he wished to stir up popular sentiment for the school among the residents of Throggs Neck. Third, he continued his ongoing efforts to be favored by the War Department and Maritime interests.

First, he met with the sympathetic Bronx Board of Trade. That organization then enlisted local support vis-à-vis William Peters, one of the major property owners of Silver Beach, a community next to Fort Schuyler. Peters backed the Academy and was friends with State Senator John J. Dunnigan, who was close to Governor Lehman.⁵⁰ This strategy had almost immediate results. First, the Throggs Neck Civic Improvement Association declared itself: "...definitely opposed to any move to convert [Fort Schuyler] into a public park." Mass meetings in support of the Academy were held in Throggs Neck.⁵¹

The reasons why the people of Throggs Neck favored the Academy over the park could be traced to two reasons that were provided by Mayor McKee in 1933. McKee, defending the park position, addressed the arguments of Throggs Neck residents. McKee said: "Property owners in the immediate vicinity have expressed alarm. . . at the prospect of huge assessments on adjoining property." McKee also said of their arguments: ". . . that establishing a park on this side will lead to the intrusion of a lot of undesirable people..."⁵²

Meanwhile, Dunnigan approached Lehman concerning legislating a new bill to allow the Academy to operate on shore. Lehman acceded that a bill could be drawn up that would allow this, but not necessarily at Fort Schuyler. Word was passed to Tomb and he drew up the bill to enable shoreside operations. Dunnigan introduced it in the State Senate where it passed and then, through some political chicanery, the Assembly.⁵³

According to Tomb, the bill was introduced late in the legislative session, and while it passed through the Senate, it would not be acted upon by the Assembly unless the bill had a special message from the Governor attached to it. Tomb, in his account, wrote that this message was drafted and attached to the bill. He said that Dunnigan was ". . . specially requested to take the matter up with the Governor." He then told Lewis Wilson of the State Education Department the situation and assured him that ". . . the bill would not be introduced without the Governor's approval and with the special message included."⁵⁴

Dunnigan, however, did not confer with the Governor. When the bill came before the Assembly, it was halted and the body called on Wilson and told him that it could not be acted on since there was no special message. According to Tomb, Wilson assumed that the message *was* attached, and said it was on the Speaker's desk. The Assembly, not bothering to check, passed the bill.⁵⁵ Tomb, commenting on the bill's approval, wrote: "On learning of this situation the Superintendent wrote to the Governor, giving him all the facts and assuming full responsibility."⁵⁶

There is a question of the veracity of Tomb's account. There was obviously some political maneuvering over the passage of the bill, but the only detailed record we have of it is from Tomb. It does, however, reveal what a hot political issue Fort Schuyler had become. The way in which the bill was passed must have angered Lehman, since he threatened to veto it. The

question now became whether or not he would do it. A hearing was called in late April 1933 in Albany for a discussion of the bill.

At these hearings, Straus and the new Mayor of New York, John P. O'Brien, led the cause of the park side. They argued that the bill would hand over Fort Schuyler to the Academy. Opposing them were Peters of Silver Beach, various maritime interests, and the Bronx Board of Trade. Lehman at this point seemed lukewarm to the bill and likely to veto it.⁵⁷

In the meanwhile, Tomb conducted a highly active campaign of speaking engagements that was for the most part concentrated in The Bronx, but also among the other boroughs. In Tomb's words his speaking style was off the cuff: "I never write a speech. . . but speak from notes, extemporaneously, as I find that I can make better contact with the audience in this way."⁵⁸ He spoke at American Legion halls as well as other local civic groups. Of particular value to the Academy's cause was the Throggs Neck Property Owners Association which firmly threw their support to Tomb.⁵⁹ Tomb was modest about his new political skills and wrote a year later: "I am not much of a politician, but this work certainly has compelled me to get in the political game."⁶⁰

According to Tomb, it was R.J. Baker, the president of the American Steamship Owners' Association that convinced Lehman to sign the bill. Under Tomb's urging, Baker sent a long telegram to Lehman insisting that he sign the act. Baker emphasized that the bill only enabled the school to search for a shore base *somewhere*, but not necessarily at Fort Schuyler. This was also sent to President Roosevelt and Senator Dunnigan along with letters of explanation. Lehman signed the bill and voided the lease.⁶¹

In signing the bill, Lehman was clear that he was not giving up the idea of a park at Fort Schuyler: "This bill is merely permissive. . . It does not specify any particular site or lease. . . It does, however, place the State in the position of securing a shore base for the Merchant Marine Academy."⁶²

Park advocates used this opportunity to lobby the War Department to compose a lease that was favorable to a parks project. The War Department, however, thinking in terms of national defense, and possibly because the new Secretary of War, George Henry Dern, was a Roosevelt pick, drew up a new lease that was favorable to the Academy. The school was allotted the property and New York State could sublease about thirty acres of the reservation to what

purpose they saw fit as long as it was for public purpose and not for profit. The Academy was allotted the area around the Fort itself. By September 1933, an accord was reached after conferences with Lehman. Robert Moses gave his approval to Lehman stating that it was “a reasonable solution to the problem.”⁶³ Lehman then gave his support to the school.⁶⁴

This lease was executed by Lehman on March 22, 1934. The rent was \$600 yearly (payable quarterly and in advance) for some of the best waterfront property in the United States.⁶⁵ Lehman took credit for resolving the controversy.

Popular memory has placed the Roosevelt lease as the contract that brought the Academy to Fort Schuyler, but as demonstrated, it was really the Lehman lease. Perhaps this is because Roosevelt was a proponent of the Academy and Lehman was originally only a moderate supporter. Also, the attachment of the famous Roosevelt name to the school can be judged to be more inspiring than Lehman's.

The Reconstruction of Fort Schuyler

With the land issue settled, Tomb's attention turned to the reconstruction of Fort Schuyler. Rehabilitating Fort Schuyler proved to be as lengthy and difficult as obtaining the property. The first problem was stipulations in the lease which declared that any changes must be temporary. Not even trees could be removed.⁶⁶

An inspection by the Academy identified several immediate problems. Buildings had to be destroyed or relocated that were within the confines of the fort, yet could not be moved because the entries and exits to the fort were too narrow. But the chief problem, according to Tomb, was the need for a new pier. The original reconstruction plan called for having the new dock in the same location as the old one, at the very tip of the peninsula, but this proved impractical. Not only was the old wooden dock too small and flimsy to handle *Empire State*, but a new construction would advance a pier too far out into Long Island Sound endangering ships rounding Throggs Neck Point.⁶⁷

Another problem was that a new dock was simply too expensive. Estimated at over \$75,000,⁶⁸ it would completely destroy the Academy's budget, which was \$117,200 in 1934.⁶⁹ Without a clear source of funding, the school continued to make plans for the rehabilitation of the fort without significant work being done.⁷⁰

The Academy got help through Depression-era government assistance. Tomb began construction using the “transient division” of the Temporary Emergency Relief Agency (TERA). TERA surveyors and architects made plans for restoration and renovation of the fort. This included constructing a pier, classrooms, machine shops, and heating plant and converting the fort’s casemates [the fort’s gun emplacement structures] into dormitories. Most of the direct supervision of the construction was headed by the Academy’s Assistant Superintendent, Captain George W.R. Hughes. Under Hughes, TERA cleared the fort of debris and took down an old curtain wall that hindered the passing of equipment.⁷¹ In addition, they began to remove earth from the roof of the fort so that it could be waterproofed. This was slow and tedious labor since heavy machines could not be used. Men shoveled the dirt by hand and loaded it onto trucks. Meanwhile, a temporary arch was made in the casemates so that some smaller machinery could enter.⁷²

At this stage, the pier was the nagging issue. Despite the terms of the lease, Tomb worked to build a permanent pier. He wrote: “As it was to be a reinforced concrete pier there was nothing temporary about it.” The War Department knew about it, but helped the school anyway. Piles began to be driven in June, 1935 with an estimated completion of September.”⁷³

Progress was slower than anticipated. First there was a lack of skilled workers.⁷⁴ Second, there were “weak sister supervisors.”⁷⁵ This alluded to a problem of the work being done by the Transient Division of TERA. Most of these personnel were unemployed seamen and they complained that they should not be constructing a school to train competition. This issue was taken up by seamen’s unions and protests were carried to Washington. Administrators in Washington dealt with the problem by removing the Transient Division. This had an effect. By March 1935, the men were estimated to be working at a 75% efficiency rate.⁷⁶

In the autumn of 1935 the work on the old fort was transferred to the federal Works Progress Administration (WPA), with a grant of \$1,752,270.⁷⁷ They began their labor in early December 1935.⁷⁸ They would first complete the pier and the repairs that TERA started before moving to new construction. This new work would entail a mess hall, heating plant, classrooms, machinist shop, study rooms, a small parade ground, and an athletic field.⁷⁹

Perhaps due to the controversies in acquiring the land, Tomb was on guard and a bit paranoid. He asserted that there was a conspiracy to undermine reconstruction efforts: “The

magnitude of the work at Fort Schuyler also disturbed WPA headquarters. . . . A secret board of Army engineers investigated and recommended that the project be abandoned.”⁸⁰ However, Colonel Brehon Somervell, the New York head of the WPA, wanted the project to proceed. Somervell removed the WPA administrator assigned to Fort Schuyler and had a new survey done. This survey was favorable. In addition, new Bronx Borough President, James J. Lyons, co-sponsored the project and the WPA grant was increased to \$2,972,272.⁸¹ With additional money and a friendly WPA, “. . . on 1 August 1936 real work started.”⁸²

It was a huge project that employed “1004 men in all classifications.” At the height of reconstruction, men worked in three shifts of 330 men⁸³ Despite these efforts, progress was slowed because of the lease stipulations. The War Department refused to approve the removal of a spur of land close to the new dock and certain outworks of the fort because of their historical value.

An appeal was made directly to President Roosevelt by Governor Lehman. Roosevelt responded sympathetically, but said: “In spite of my desire to help in every way I can, I find that the War Department has done everything that it is legally authorized to do, and I find myself without authority to direct any further concession.”⁸⁴

Tomb, however, had an Academy to build and grew increasingly frustrated with the War Department. All construction moved at a crawl “due to the necessity of obtaining permission from the War Department at every step.”⁸⁵ His frustration burst in the fall of 1936 when necessary machinery could not get through the outworks. He once again asked the War Department for permission to remove the wall. They denied the request. Tomb dynamited the wall.⁸⁶

This was reported by a discharged employee to the War Department. A firestorm erupted in which even President Roosevelt wrote a letter to Tomb warning him not to blow up the fort. There were conferences and inspections by the federal government. According to Tomb: “there was the deuce to pay.” Yet the controversy gradually ebbed. Tomb stood doggedly by his actions: “Things had to be done in spite of the terms of the lease to enable construction work to be accomplished, and the Superintendent had to accept responsibility for authorizing the same regardless of the law.”⁸⁷

Renegotiations

Issues such as this, plus a growing concern for future expansion compelled the Academy to seek more space and try to acquire the grounds permanently instead of on lease. Tomb's chief fear was that the Academy would be confined to their 20 acres which would limit growth. Specifically, the Academy wanted to have open space for drills and athletics.

The Department of Education, therefore, approached Robert Moses and requested that the Park Department cede 10 acres of land. According to Tomb "As soon as [the] request was made a most insulting letter was sent by Commissioner Moses to the Deputy Commissioner of Education, refusing the request." This letter is no longer extant, but perhaps it is best that its contents are left to the imagination.⁸⁸

In the spring of 1937, Governor Lehman pushed for Congressional legislation that would hand ownership of the site from the Federal government to New York State. This did not come to pass, however, since Roosevelt did not give his support.⁸⁹ Probably, Roosevelt, under the advice of the War Department, wanted to retain the land as ultimately federally controlled. In addition, the War Department had other considerations since other states were monitoring the situation at Fort Schuyler to determine if they could obtain similar federal lands in their respective states.⁹⁰

Tomb, however, managed to negotiate an extended lease. In this lease, the wording was revised under the urging of Tomb by the Military Affairs Committee in the House. When stating the purpose of the Fort Schuyler grounds, the words, "chiefly for nautical purpose," was altered to remove the word "chiefly." Tomb rationalized:

If this is not eliminated the whole problem will be thrown into politics with Park Commissioner Moses of the City of New York stirring up political trouble. . . As I understand it, the War Department is vitally interested in national defense and is strongly interested in national parks, but is not interested in municipal parks where the locality is supposed to set aside its own park area. Local parks are not a national problem but national defense is. . . Although we have only twenty acres and the park has thirty acres, the claim would be made that we have the chief part of the reservation due to the fact that the fort is located on the Academy area. It is considered that this question is most important and that it cannot be settled by throwing the matter back into politics.⁹¹

One can imagine how Robert Moses must have reacted when he found out that the entire reservation was now legally designated for only "nautical purposes." This new lease,

furthermore, was for 25 years with a 25-year renewal option. It would also allow for changes in the buildings and permit new construction.⁹² This lease, however, was not needed for such a lengthy time. After years of lobbying, in June 1949 the federal government transferred the property permanently to New York State.

This was a victory for Tomb, but he did not exult since Robert Moses was a man who by Tomb's admission: ". . . is very powerful politically and none of the state authorities care to oppose him."⁹³ Lewis A. Wilson of the Education Department, gingerly brokered a "gentleman's agreement" where the city parks department could hold onto 20 acres at the western end. The Academy, however, took control over the park territory during World War II for national defense purposes.⁹⁴ The Park Department never got this land back.

On Saturday, May 21, 1938, Fort Schuyler was dedicated as the new home of the New York Merchant Marine Academy. The total cost of reconstruction was \$4,250,000 in WPA grants, not including what outlays were made by the school in their regular budget. The struggle to obtain the site, as well as the grueling construction, were some of the most tension-fraught times in the history of the New York State Maritime College. Yet there is no doubt, that the acquisition and reconstruction of Fort Schuyler by the Academy changed the face of The Bronx and allowed that school to evolve into the Maritime College.



On May 21, 1938, most of the construction was complete and in a formal ceremony, the fort was dedicated as the New York State Merchant Marine Academy.

Today, Fort Schuyler is still the home of the State University of New York Maritime College. With over 1,500 civilian and regimented students, the college has expanded its

programs to include graduate programs in global trade and transportation, as well as undergraduate degrees in engineering and marine transportation. The school still has a training ship in the form of *Empire State VI*, which, when not on its annual cruise, can be found berthed at the pier on Long Island Sound.

Notes

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- ³ N.Y. Legislature, *An Act to Amend the Education Law, in Relationship to the Change in Name of the NY State Nautical School and Qualifications for the Admission Thereto*, 152nd sess., chap. 6, February 8, 1929.
- ⁴ “Famous Sailing Vessel on her Death March,” *San Diego Sun*, June 13, 1931.
- ⁵ *Annual Report of the New York State Merchant Marine Academy*, 1931, Stephen B. Luce Library Archives, Throggs Neck, NY, 8.
- ⁶ James H. Tomb, *The Saga of Fort Schuyler*, 1943, Stephen B. Luce Library Archives, Throggs Neck, NY, 1.
- ⁷ *Annual Report of the New York State Merchant Marine Academy*, 1929, Stephen B. Luce Library Archives, Throggs Neck, NY, 8.
- ⁸ *Annual Report of the New York State Merchant Marine Academy*, 1930, Stephen B. Luce Library Archives, Throggs Neck, NY, 9.
- ⁹ Tomb, 1.
- ¹⁰ “Squad and Mules Hold Fort Schuyler,” *New York Times*, July 3, 1911.
- ¹¹ *Minutes of the Board of Visitors of the New York State Merchant Marine Academy*, October 18, 1928. Stephen B. Luce Library Archives, Throggs Neck, NY.
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- ¹³ Robert A. Caro, *The Power Broker*, (New York: Vintage, 1975), 305.
- ¹⁴ “Anne Frank’s doomed American dream” *The Times of London*, February 15, 2007..
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- ²¹ “War Dept. Ready to Yield Ft. Schuyler for Park, But Seeks Academy Space,” *New York Herald*. June 5, 1932.
- ²² Tomb, 3.
- ²³ *Ibid.*
- ²⁴ Murrill, Winston. “Bronx Citizens Up in Arms Over Roosevelt Support of Transfer of Throggs Neck Land, Wanted for Park, to Marine Academy,” *New York World-Telegram*, August 8, 1932.
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- 30 "Straus Appeals to Secretary of War for Adequate Park at Fort Schuyler," *Bronx News*, July 18, 1932.
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- 54 Ibid.
- 55 Ibid.
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- 57 Ibid.
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⁶⁵ This rent was payable by the State, and the lease specifically stated that it would, "...permit the New York State Merchant Marine Academy to use without charge during the continuance of this lease."

⁶⁶ The lease literally stated that, "...the lessee shall cut no timber, conduct no mining operations, remove no sand, gravel or kindred substance from the ground, permit no waste of any kind, or in any manner substantially change the contour or condition of the demised premises."

⁶⁷ Tomb, 8.

⁶⁸ *Minutes*, April 17, 1934.

⁶⁹ *Annual Report of the New York State Merchant Marine Academy*, 1934, Stephen B. Luce Library Archives, Throggs Neck, NY, 17.

⁷⁰ *Minutes*, April 17, 1934.

⁷¹ Tomb, 9.

⁷² *Minutes*, March 19, 1935.

⁷³ The actual completion of the pier took far longer in part due to the inefficiency of TERA, the takeover of the WPA, as well as ice floes in the winter of 1935-36. Work on the pier was completed far enough by January 19, 1937 to bring *Annex* and *Empire State* to dock.

⁷⁴ Tomb, 9.

⁷⁵ *Minutes*, March 19, 1935.

⁷⁶ *Minutes*, March 19, 1935.

⁷⁷ *Minutes*, October 22, 1935.

⁷⁸ *Minutes*, June 7, 1935.

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⁸⁰ Tomb, 10.

⁸¹ The school would receive other grants from the WPA leading to a total of over \$4 million.

⁸² Tomb, 10.

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⁸⁵ *Minutes*, January 21, 1936.

⁸⁶ Tomb, 10.

⁸⁷ *Ibid*.

⁸⁸ *Ibid*, 10-11.

⁸⁹ J.H. Tomb, Letter from J.H. Tomb to Captain Milan L. Pittman, 26 March, 1937. Stephen B. Luce Library Archives, Throggs Neck, NY.

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⁹³ J.H. Tomb, Letter from J.H. Tomb to Rear Admiral H.G. Hamlet, 29 June, 1937. Stephen B. Luce Library Archives, Throggs Neck, NY.

⁹⁴ *Minutes*, January 20, 1942.

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