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Historic Work on Davids Island

What was once Fort Slocum in New York becomes a site for learning about military history and nature.

By JoAnne Castagna, Ed.D.

Decaying homes with blown out windows, overgrown grass, and 1950s vintage cars parked in dilapidated garages. This was the scene at Davids Island.

"It looks like a disaster movie could have been filmed here," says Nancy Brighton, Lead Archaeologist of the Environmental Branch of the US Army Corps of Engineers, New York District. "It's surreal. It looks like residents of this little village just picked up and left."

Brighton was describing the abandoned remains of Fort Slocum, a former US military base that at one time occupied Davids Island, an uninhabited 80-acre piece of property located in the Long Island Sound, about half a mile off the shore of New Rochelle, New York.

In December 2008, the Army Corps completed initial work at the site that included removing dilapidated structures—a request from the Office of Economic Adjustment and the City of New Rochelle, the island's owner. Plans

are in the works to revive the island and make it assessable for public use.

Safety and preservation

The Corps will make the island safe for the public while also preserving the island's wildlife, which includes threatened animal species, and its rich military history.

In 1867, Fort Slocum was established on the island on the site of a former Civil War hospital and for more than a century served in various military incarnations. The active post has been



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the site of a military hospital, an artillery mortar battery, and a training post. During World War II, the fort was the most active recruitment center in the United States and served as a staging area for troops heading overseas during the two world wars. The Air Force also used the site for several years.

Fort Slocum's last military incarnation was in the 1960s, when it was used as a missile command base. Since then the fort and the island have laid dormant and the public has been denied access.

Since then, the site has been eyed as a possible location for a power plant or public park. It's also been an interest of real estate mogul Donald Trump, who has considered building luxury condos on the island's shores, which feature over a mile of beach and a variety of marine life and birds.

But until business leaders and property owners decide on the island's future, the Army Corps continues to clear the site, making it clean and safe for public use.

Progress report

In 2005, the Army Corps began demolishing and removing 93 decaying structures from the former Fort Slocum. The

project team's first task, prior to any demolition, was to move a large Osprey family nest inland from the island's pier to protect it from the construction.

In New York State, the Osprey is considered a "species of concern," which means the bird's population has declined in the past and is making a slow recovery.

"It's easy to say that this was a simple project. All you're doing is demolishing buildings. Bring out the equipment and just start banging away," says Gregory Goepfert, Project Manager, US Army Corps of Engineers, New York District. "But it's more than that. There was great interest to preserve some of the rich history of the island."

The Army Corps came up with a variety of solutions to preserve the historical aspects of the project—something project teams have done successfully with other projects.

Goepfert, with help from Brighton and the project contractor, TetraTech, performed extensive historical research on each of the 93 structures on the island, many of which were of various military architectural styles.

Research included digging up historical data, taking photos, and performing archaeological studies. Most of the

structures were historically significant and became part of the Fort Slocum Historic and Archaeological District. Of these structures, Brighton said that about one third were identified as having historical or archaeological significance and could be restored or partially restored.

After the team completed the research on each building, the structure was either slated for restoration or demolished if it was not restorable. This system kept the project moving forward and helped streamline and expenses. Materials from the demolished structures were recycled or reused, including large amounts of steel. Hazardous materials, such as asbestos, are being removed and delivered to licensed facilities.

Restoration efforts

Brighton worked with a number of individuals from Westchester County and the City of New Rochelle to map out a strategy for the historic structures slated for preservation and restoration. However, since the future of the island is still in limbo, the City of New Rochelle recently decided not to restore any of the island's structures—at least until a plan for the island is in place.



What's left of the former fort is now open to the public, including the fort's overall landscaped vegetation, a seawall, the installation's original flagpole, mortar pits from the late 19th century, tennis courts, walkways, and a cannon used during the Spanish-American War.

Brighton says that if the public wants to find out more about these historic items, as well as other aspects of the fort, the Army Corps—in collaboration with the Westchester County Historical Society and the City of New Rochelle Public Library—is creating a virtual

archive and public exhibit that will be available online.

This virtual archive and exhibit will include all of the extensive research the Army Corps gathered during this project, including the historical data on each of the fort's structures, photos, maps, videos, and oral histories from more than two dozen individuals who used to live and work at Fort Slocum, in both print and audio formats. In addition, various museums will include the Corps

reports in their archives.

And one last note: The Osprey family, whose nest had to be moved at the beginning of this project, has since grown three-fold. Perhaps this signifies an adaptable and prosperous future for Davids Island. ■

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