

GUARDIAN OF THE SOUND

**This edition of 1500
includes 500 numbered copies,
of which this is number:**

*For Martha P. Rafferty,
and all who served and worked
at Fort H.G. Wright.*

Front endpaper: 245th Coast Artillery Regiment, New York National Guard, on parade at Fort H.G. Wright. 1924.
Estate of Col. Charles O. Lawes, courtesy of Henry H. Fisher.

Back endpaper: 11th Coast Artillery Regiment, Fort H.G. Wright. Date unknown.
Courtesy of H.L. Ferguson Museum, Fishers Island, NY.

The authors thank William C. Gaines for permission to publish
"Coastal and Harbor Defenses of Long Island Sound." © 1998 William C. Gaines.

Copyright © 1998 by Pierce Rafferty and John Wilton

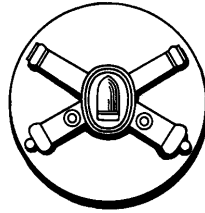
All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced without written permission of the publisher.

ISBN number 0-9664192-0-0

A Mount Mercer Press Book • Printed in the United States

Mount Mercer, Inc. • P.O. Box 988 Canal Street Station • New York, NY 10013

GUARDIAN OF THE SOUND



A Pictorial History of
FORT H.G. WRIGHT
Fishers Island, N.Y.

Pierce Rafferty & John Wilton

Mount Mercer Press

NEW YORK CITY • 1998

Acknowledgments

FIRST AND FOREMOST, we would like to thank the following individuals who shared their private postcard collections, military artifacts and photo albums, enhancing the creation of a collective portrait of the Fort with the greatest possible variety of images. Many thanks to Tom Armstrong, Henry C. Blackiston, Peter Burr, the Estate of Winifred Bartlett Clark, Barbara Coyle, Roger Davis, the Estate of Col. Charles O. Dawes, Jim Diaz, Francis Doyen, Matthew Edwards, Harry Ferguson, Henry H. Fisher, Mary Cyr Grebe, Marilyn Greaves, Hubert J. Hughes, Anna May Janas, Frank Kamradt, Lewis Lamb, Clayton E. Lathrop, George R. Laughlin, Sandy Gaston, Hector F. Methot, Herbert Moss, Nancy Newman, Mary Pankiewicz, George Payne, Mary Collings Pillsbury, Norbert Raith, Clyde K. Rickard, Jim Righter, Alfred K. Schroeder, Briscoe Smith, Thomas B. Sweeney and Jim Wall. It should be noted that the list includes some whose material was not included in the final edit, but whose efforts for the book were as much appreciated as any other.

We would like to give special thanks to Sandy Esser for her generous contribution of images from her Fort Wright collection; to Donna Shoop, whose grandfather C.K. Rickard served at the Fort in the 1910s, for providing his unique images of daily life at the Fort, and for donating the collection to the H.L. Ferguson Museum; to Fred E. Saner, whose father Master Sgt. Fred Saner, USA (Ret.), served in the 11th Coast Artillery Band for 35 years, for sharing his collection with us, and donating it to the Museum. We are indebted to Helen Best for the photographs taken by and of her father, Major Howard Best, who served at Fort Wright with the 11th Coast Artillery for many years, and was wounded in France during World War I; and to Maj. Gen. George Ruhlen, USA (Ret.), whose father, Col. George Ruhlen, Jr., USA (Ret.), served at the Fort from 1914-16, for providing not only his father's photographs, but also his own recollections of Fort Wright during that early period.

A great contribution to this project was made by George R. Laughlin, who tirelessly researched Fishers Island and Fort Wright in various Connecticut libraries and historical societies. This book would not have been the same without his assistance. We are also very grateful for the extended and painstaking research done by Brian Rafferty in the text files at the National Archives branch in Waltham, Massachusetts; the research done in newspaper microfilm files by Anja Hanson in Portland, Maine; and the preliminary stills research done by Joan Yoshiwara in Washington, D.C. Essential to our book was the lifesaving editorial work done by Arnoud Hekkens and the proofreading performed under adverse conditions by Sandy Crimmins.

We would also like to express our gratitude to all the Coast Defense Study Group (CDSG) members who gave us invaluable help, in particular William C. Gaines, for answering innumerable questions and for writing articles on the Fort's military history; Nelson H. Lawry and Edward R. Robinson for their patient

assistance in interpreting and identifying emplacements and ordnance; and Robert G. Borrell, Sr., for providing the 11th Coast Artillery's Coat of Arms. Numerous other members of the CDSG generously shared information and documents relating to the history of Fort Wright, including: Frederick M. Baldwin; Gerald W. Butler; Roger W. Davis; Elliot L. Deutsch; Theodore L. Gatchel; Alexander M. Holder, Jr.; Gary P. Paliwoda; and Leo K. Polaski.

For their support of this project, and their ongoing efforts to preserve and display Fishers Island's history, we would like to extend our heartiest thanks to all the board members of the H.L. Ferguson Museum, Fishers Island, New York, especially the Museum's indefatigable president, Charles B. Ferguson; and Edward Horning, Curator; Katherine Horning, assistant curator; Marie Gaillard, collections director; and Bagley Reid, member of the board.

Fort H.G. Wright Association members Peter Burr, George Esser and Pat Kibbe each made important contributions to the project, including the establishment of links to the dispersed Fort Wright community and the gathering of many images. Peter Williamson's research on the 1902 maneuvers greatly facilitated our efforts.

We are also most appreciative of the assistance provided by the following individuals and institutions: David M. Johnson, The Casemate Museum (Fort Monroe, Virginia); B.J. Linck, Connecticut State Library (Hartford); the staff of the Prints and Photographs Division, The Library of Congress (Washington, D.C.); Steven Seames, Massachusetts Military Archives (Worcester, Massachusetts); Helen Keith and Janet Godwin, Mystic River Historical Society (Mystic, Connecticut); the staff of the Military Museum - New York State Division of Military and Naval Affairs (Latham, New York); Jack Green, Naval Historical Center (Washington, D.C.); Richard H. Smith, Cartographic and Architectural Branch, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) II (College Park, Maryland); Gregory J. Plunges, NARA - Northeast Region (New York City); George Young, NARA - Northeast Region (Waltham, Massachusetts); the staff of the Still Pictures Branch, NARA II; the staff of the New York State Library, (Albany, New York); Col. Rene C. Provost, (Ret.) AUS, Office of the Adjutant General Connecticut (Hartford); Robert Whiteman, Ripley's Believe It or Not (Rye, New York); Kenneth S. Carlson, Rhode Island State Archives (Providence, Rhode Island); Randy Heckenburg, U.S. Army Military History Institute (Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania); Judith A. Sibley, USMA Library and Alicia Mauldin, USMA Archives, U.S. Military Academy (West Point, New York); Rose Hutchinson, Watervliet Arsenal Museum (Watervliet, New York).

Next to last, but not least, we are grateful for the general assistance provided by Richard Ahman, Deborah Borgert, Bob and Louisa Evans, Kevin Green, Phil Knauff, Joe Rogan, Peter Rogan and David Thaxton.

And last, but absolutely not least, Margaret Crimmins gets the biggest thanks of all, for her constructive criticism and her unflagging support.

Each and every one made this book possible.

Contents

Acknowledgments... *iv*

Chronology... *vi*

Introduction... *ix*

Photographs... *1*

Major General H.G. Wright and Colonel Smith S. Leach... *2*

Pre-Fort military activity; 1902 Army-Navy maneuvers... *6*

Regional map and Fort H.G. Wright aerials... *20*

The arrival of troops and supplies... *25*

Officers Row and Parade Grounds... *42*

National Guard camp... *54*

The faces of Fort Wright... *63*

Armament

Manufacturing guns and carriages... *96*

Dynamite gun... *98*

6-inch disappearing gun... *100*

10-inch disappearing gun... *108*

12-inch disappearing gun... *112*

16-inch disappearing gun... *117*

12-inch mortars... *122*

Field and antiaircraft guns, secondary armament,
tow targets, submarine mines and naval activity... *128*

Elizabeth Field... *138*

1921 aerials... *142*

Buildings and structures... *144*

Sports at the Fort... *182*

Snapshots of Fort life... *194*

Scrapping the guns, razing the buildings... *202*

The emplacements today... *204*

Maps of the main reservation... *206*

“The Matter of Proceedings to Acquire Land on Fishers Island.”... *208*

The Coastal and Harbor Defenses of Long Island Sound

World War I... *219*

Between the Wars... *223*

World War II... *226*

Selected Bibliography... *235*

About this Book... *236*



CHRONOLOGY

- 18,000 BC (*approx.*) Last ice advance (Wisconsinian) begins retreat in Long Island area. As it recedes, it pauses, leaving behind piles of glacial debris. Fishers Island is formed.
- 1614 Dutch explorer Captain Adrian Block discovers Fishers Island.
- 1640 John Winthrop the Younger successfully appeals to the General Court of Massachusetts for grant to Fishers Island.
- 1644 To further confirm land grant, John Winthrop purchases Fishers Island from Native Americans. First settlement is established.
- 1704 Signal beacon erected on Mount Prospect.
- 1775-79 British fleet repeatedly raids Fishers Island, seizing sheep, cattle, hogs and other provisions. In most instances, compensation is made.
- 1779 *July 5* British plunder Fishers Island and Plum Island, seizing livestock and torching hay and buildings. No compensation made.
- 1781 *September 6* British force invades New London, burning large sections of the city. Defenders of Fort Griswold, Groton, slaughtered after surrendering. Nathaniel Shaw, New London's greatest patriot, misses the battle while fishing on Fishers Island.
- 1863 Winthrop heirs sell Fishers Island to George Chester for \$55,000; title transferred to Robert R. Fox.
- 1871 Government acquires "10 and three-tenths acres, more or less," at Race Point.
- 1885 US Army leases land on the western tip of Fishers Island. Rifle squads from Fort Trumbull, New London arrive for military training.
March 3 President Cleveland appoints "Board on Fortifications or Other Defenses," commonly known as the Endicott Board.
- 1886 *January 26* The Endicott Board releases its report, detailing program for new seacoast defenses.
- 1888 *July-Sept.* Troops arrive for training exercises. Tourists flock to Fishers Island to watch the military spectacle. Mock invasion by the Navy is canceled at the last moment.
- 1889 Edmund M. and Walton Ferguson purchase almost all of Fishers Island for \$250,000.
- 1891 *November 14* *Harper's Weekly* publishes article proposing a chain of island forts across the outer entrance to Long Island Sound.
- 1896 *July 17* Captain Smith S. Leach, Corps of Engineers, is ordered to prepare plans for the defense of the eastern entrance to Long Island Sound and to secure land for fortifications.
- 1897 *July 17-24* Naval Battalion, Connecticut National Guard, encamps on Fishers Island for tour of duty aboard the USS *Maine*.
August 24 Condemnation hearings begin in Brooklyn, NY, to determine price for fort site on Fishers Island.
- 1898 *February 15* USS *Maine* blows up in Havana Harbor.
April 25 Congress declares nation has been at war with Spain since April 21.
April-May Major Leach implements emergency defense plan for Long Island Sound.
June 24 Condemnation Board awards Edmund M. and Walton Ferguson a total of \$167,000 for 215 acres of condemned land on the western tip of Fishers Island.
Theodora Gordon receives \$6,000 for "1 acre plus house."
September 5 Military in full possession of land for fortification purposes on Fishers Island.
December Construction of gun emplacements begins.
- 1899 *February* Silver Eel Pond dredged open, creating cove for military dock.
- 1900 *April 4* Post named in honor of Major General Horatio G. Wright, Civil War commander and former Chief of Engineers.
- 1901 *February* First troops arrive at Fort H.G. Wright.
March 7 Artillery Corps takes over first completed batteries for 6-inch, 10-inch, and 12-inch disappearing guns.
October 31 Dynamite gun successfully test-fired at Race Point.
- 1902 *September 1-5* Joint Army-Navy maneuvers pit the island forts against the North Atlantic Squadron. Fort H.G. Wright 'sinks' squadron.



Fred E. Saner

- 1908-09 Government acquires additional land, including west side of Hay Harbor peninsula, tract on Mount Prospect and right-of-way across golf course.
- 1910 *January 1* Sixty-seven members of 131st Co., Coast Artillery, placed under arrest for refusing orders to take 15-mile march around the Island.
July 30 Militiamen battle regulars at Fort Wright after being called "tin soldiers."
- 1911 New hospital is built overlooking Silver Eel Cove.
- 1917 *April 6* US declares war on Germany. Fort H.G. Wright becomes the Headquarters of the Coast Defenses of Long Island Sound (CDLIS).
December 20 56th Regiment, Coast Artillery Corps (CAC), is formed from within the CDLIS.
- 1918 *March 28* 56th Regiment leaves Fort H.G. Wright for service overseas, participates in the Oisne-Aisne and Meuse-Argonne offensives.
April 6 Government purchases 18.37 acre tract on North Hill.
June 1 68th Regiment, CAC, is formed from within the CDLIS. The 68th leaves Fort H.G. Wright on August 7, for service in France. The regiment arrives too late to engage in active combat.
- 1920 (*Circa*) Hangar is constructed for observation balloons.
- 1921 Sub-aqueous sound ranging experiments begin at Fort H.G. Wright.
- 1924 Fort H.G. Wright becomes the Headquarters for the 11th Coast Artillery Regiment.
- 1925 The term "coast defenses" is replaced by "harbor defenses", as it more accurately describes the primary function of the Coast Artillery Corps.
Fort H.G. Wright becomes the Headquarters of the Harbor Defenses of the Long Island Sound.
- 1931 *June 11* Elizabeth Field is dedicated, named in honor of Elizabeth Nugent, daughter of Col. George A. Nugent, Commander of Fort H.G. Wright.
- 1932 Fort theater opens.
- 1938 *September 21* Hurricane hits Fishers Island.
- 1940 Harbor Defense Modernization Program proposes long-range armament for the defense of the Sound.
Reported capacity at Fort H.G. Wright: 30 officers, 30 NCOs, 703 enlisted men, 23 animals, and 32 hospital beds.
August 27 National Guard mobilized.
September 16 242nd Coast Artillery of the Connecticut National Guard assigned to the Harbor Defenses of Long Island Sound.
- 1941 *December 7* Harbor Defenses of Long Island Sound placed on full alert.
- 1942 Fort H.G. Wright becomes major center for processing Coast Artillery troops for domestic and overseas service.
April 6 Government leases Hill 90, at the east end of Fishers Island, also known as Hill Watch, for fire-control stations and fire-control radar.
- 1943 Government purchases 94.42 acres at Wilderness Point for modern batteries. Overall size of military reservation approximately 419 acres.
February 15 Construction begins for two 16-inch gun emplacements on Wilderness Point.
June 28 Womens Auxiliary Army Corps (WAC) activated and assigned to Fort H.G. Wright.
- 1944 *March 3* US Navy Lighter-Than-Air Detachment ONE-ONE, arrives at Elizabeth Field.
March 12 11th Coast Artillery Regiment departs for Fort Leonard Wood, MO. 242nd Coast Artillery assumes control of the Harbor Defenses of Long Island Sound.
May 23 16-inch gun emplacements at Wilderness Point completed. Guns never mounted due to diminished threat to the region.
September 242nd Coast Artillery Regiment inactivated, personnel reassigned.
- 1945 *July 16* Alamogordo, NM. Nuclear Age begins.
- 1949 *May 31* Fort H.G. Wright placed in an inactive status, pending further study for other possible uses.
- 1950 Government screens Fort H.G. Wright and decides "there is no further need for the property."
June 30 Coast Artillery is abolished. Jet aircraft, long-range missiles and nuclear weapons render harbor defense by seacoast artillery obsolete.
- 1958 *August 15* Race Point Corporation buys fifty-six acre tract of Fort H.G. Wright by auction for \$350,000.



US Military History Institute

The earliest known photograph of military presence on Fishers Island. July 1888.