

Corps of Engineers helps open possibilities for Davids Island in Long Island Sound

# Fort Slocum



**TOP:** Oblique aerial photograph of Fort Slocum, taken November 15, 1961. The fort's last military incarnation was during that time when it served as a missile command base. Since then, the island has laid dormant and the public has been denied access. (Photo from Fort Slocum Alumni and Friends Collection, Michael J. Cavanaugh, Los Angeles, CA, custodian.) **TITLE PAGE:** Fort Slocum Post Headquarters, built in 1909. (Photo by Tetra Tech EC, Inc.)

**D**ecaying homes with blown out windows, overgrown grass lawns, and 1950's vintage cars parked in dilapidated garages. That was the scene at Davids Island. "It looks like a disaster movie could be filmed here," said Nancy Brighton, Lead Archaeologist of the Environmental Branch of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, New York District. Brighton looked in awe as she walked around. "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 U.S. military base that at one time occupied Davids Island, an uninhabited 80-acre piece of property located in the Long Island Sound, one half a mile off the shore of New Rochelle, New York.

By JoAnne Castagna, Ed.D.



This December of 2008, the Army Corps will be completing their work at the site that includes creating open space by removing these decaying structures. This work is being performed at the request of the Office of Economic Adjustment and the City of New Rochelle, owner of the island, who plans on reviving the island and making it assessable for public use. The Corps will make the island safe for the public while at the same time 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 in over a century served in various military incarnations. The active post has served as 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. In addition, for several years the fort was used by the U.S. Air Force. The fort's last military incarnation was in the 1960's, as a missile command base. Since then the island has laid dormant and the public has been denied access.

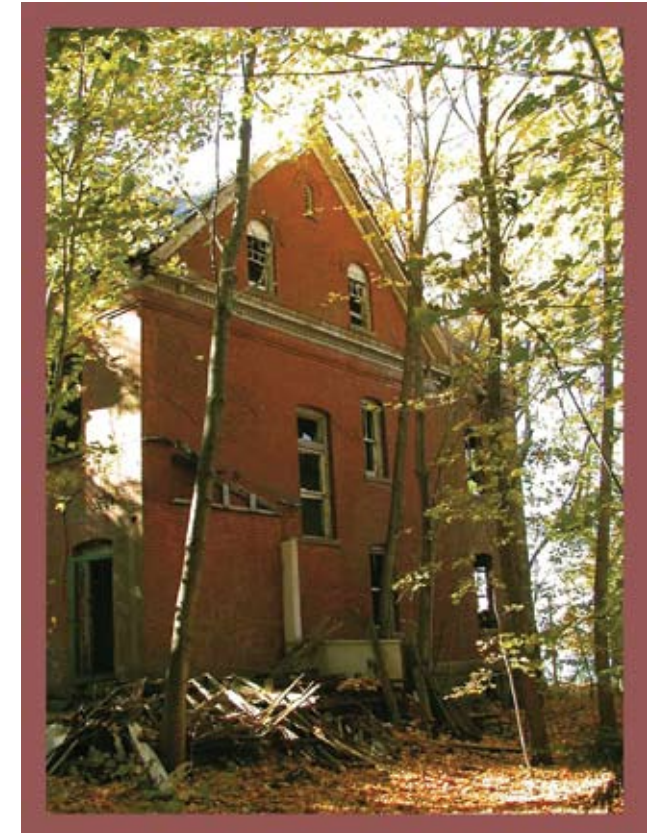
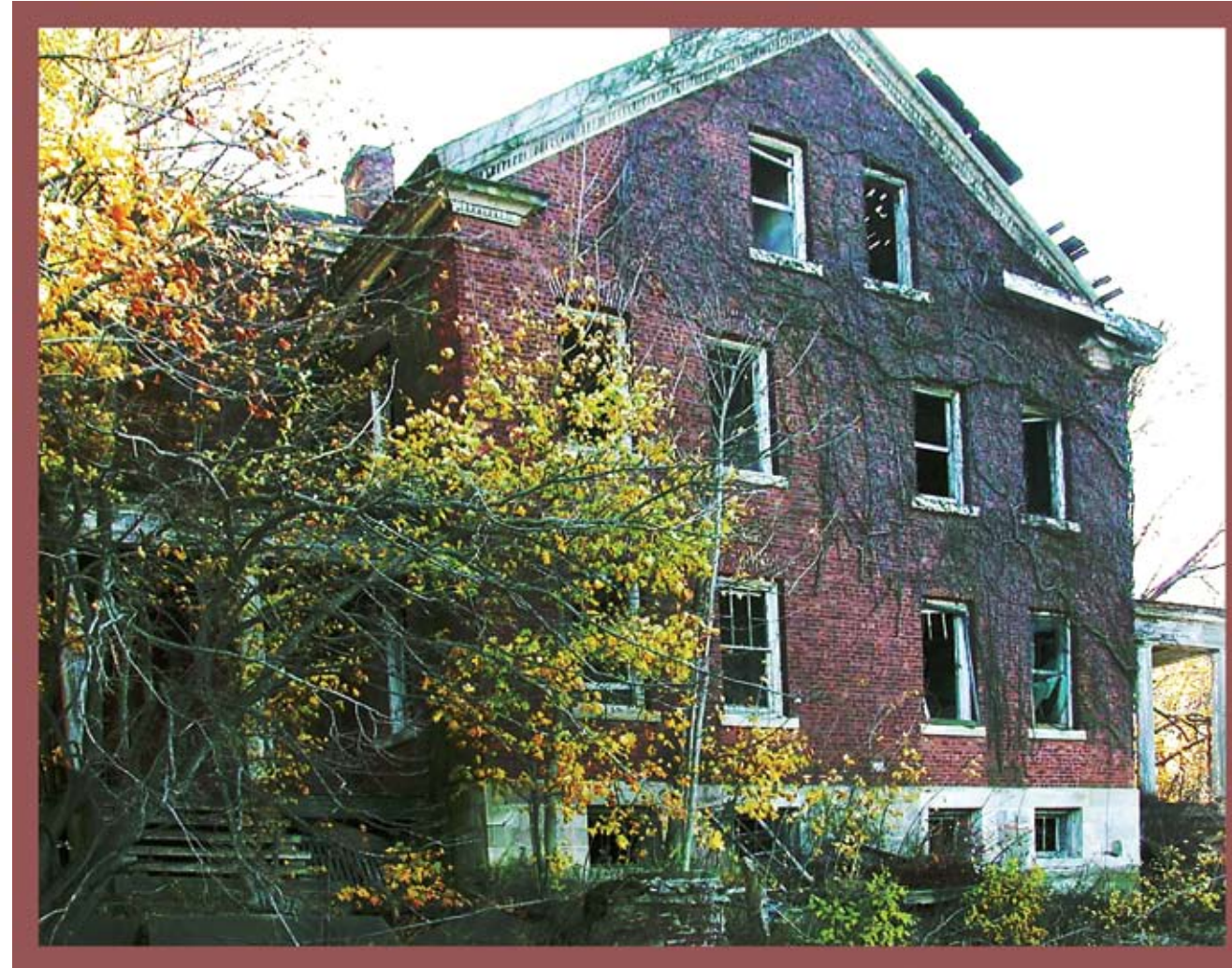
Since that time, the island has been eyed as a possible location for a power plant. In addition, the sanctuary's wide variety of marine life, birds and over a mile of beach has made it tempting for real estate mogul Donald Trump to consider placing luxury condos on its shores. In more recent years it's been considered as a location for a public park and nature preserve.

For whatever purpose is decided for the island, the Army Corps is clearing the site to make it clean and safe for public use. In 2005 the Army Corps began demolishing and removing 93 decaying structures from the former fort.

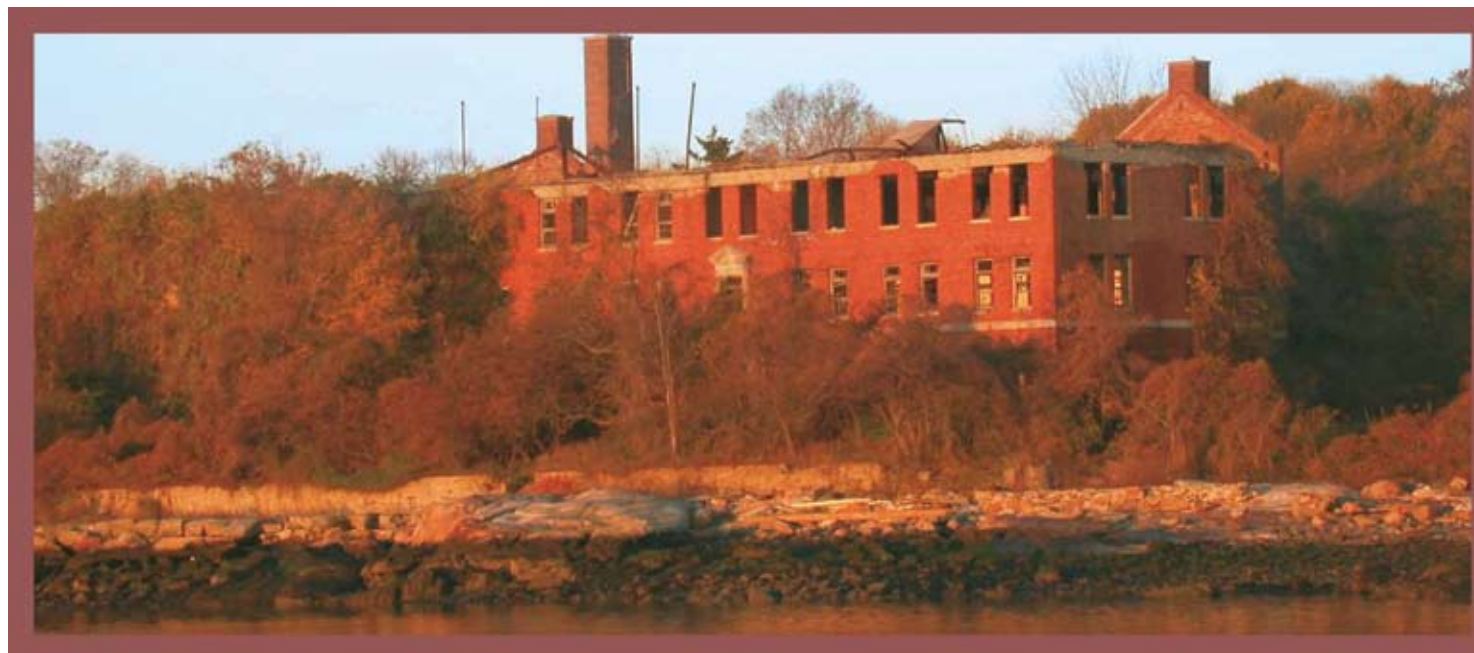
The very first task the project team performed before beginning any demolition was to move a large Osprey family nest inland from the island's pier in order to protect it from the construction. In New York State, the Osprey is considered a "Species of Concern," which means the bird's population has declined in the past and is making a slow recovery.

"It's easy to say that this was an easy project. All you're doing is demolishing buildings. Bring out the equipment and just start banging away," said Gregory Goepfert, Project Manager, U. S. 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 understood this and as it's done many times in the past, it came up with a variety of solutions to preserve the historical aspects of the project.

Goepfert with the assistance of 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. This research included digging up historical data, taking photos and performing archaeological studies. Most of the structures were historically significant as 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 if desired could be restored or partially restored.



**TOP:** (L) Officer's Quarters built 1905, (R) Officer's Quarters built 1895. **BOTTOM:** Enlisted Mens Barracks built 1930. (Photos by Tetra Tech EC, Inc.)

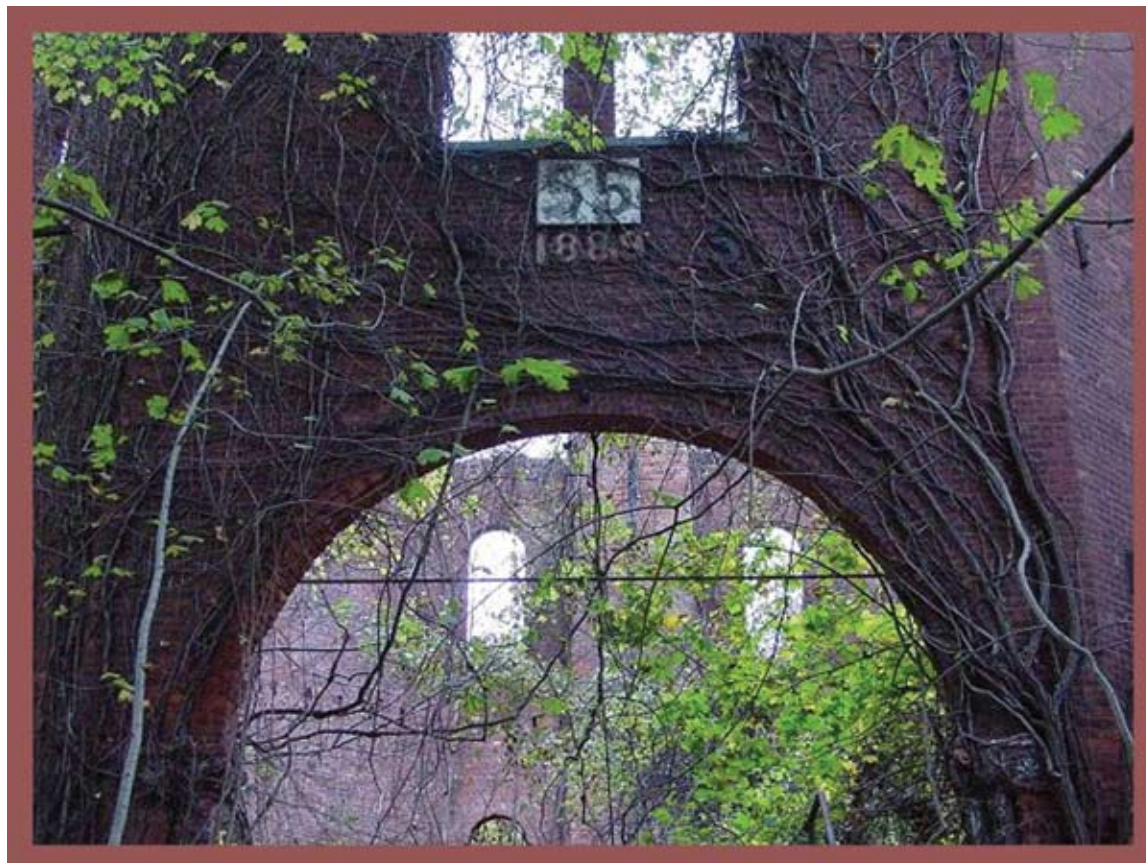


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**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:** 1. *The Commanding Officer's Quarters built 1893.* 2. *A view from the water of Fort Slocum in 1963.* 3. *Entranceway to the Drill Hall & Gymnasium built 1909.* 4. *The very first task the project team performed before beginning any demolition was to move a large Osprey family nest inland from the island's pier in order 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.* 5. *Entrance to an Enlisted Men's Barracks built in 1889. (All photos less the waterway view by Tetra Tech EC, Inc. Former courtesy of the author)*



After research was completed on each of the buildings, the structures were demolished if they were determined not restorable. So construction and historical preservation efforts were working in tandem in order to move the project forward and not waste time and money.

This fall, one of the key structures on the island was demolished marking the near completion of the project. The island's large water tower that has been a sailing "landmark" for over 78 years, and marks the edge of the island, was brought down.

Much of the material waste from the demolition is being recycled and reused that includes a large amount of steel, especially from the water tower. Hazardous materials, such as asbestos, are being removed and brought to licensed facilities.

Brighton worked with a number of interested parties from Westchester County and the City of New Rochelle to determine what should be done with those historic structures that could be preserved. Since the future of the island hasn't been determined, the City of New Rochelle, who owns the property, recently decided to not restore any of the island's structures. Understandably the City doesn't want to fund the maintenance of structures as the use of the island is being determined.

However, remnants of the former fort will be preserved on the island for the public to view including the fort's overall landscaped vegetation, a seawall, the flagpole, mortar pits from the late 19th century, tennis courts, walkways, and a cannon used during the Spanish-American War.

Brighton said that if the public wishes 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, are creating a virtual archive and public exhibit that will be viewable on the Internet.

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 over 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.

The future of the island is still undecided, but what is certain is that what has only primarily been a wildlife sanctuary will soon be accessible to the public.

Speaking of wildlife, the Osprey family whose nest had to be moved at the beginning of this project has since grown three fold. Maybe this signifies an adaptable and prosperous future for Davids Island.

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