

A brief history of Governors Island

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The island, discovered by the Dutch explorer Adriaen Block, was referred to by The Native Americans of the Manhattan region as Pagganck ("Nut Island") after the Island's plentiful hickory, oak and chestnut trees. Its location made the Island a perfect fishing camp for local tribes and many residents of the area used the Island seasonally. In June of 1637, Wouter Van Twiller, representative of Holland, purchased Governors Island from the Native Americans of Manahatas for two ax heads, a string of beads, and a handful of nails. Though he was a representative of the Dutch Government, Van Twiller purchased the Island for his private use. The Island, thereafter known as Noten Eylant or Nutten Island, was confiscated by the Dutch Government a year later.

In 1664 the English captured New Amsterdam, renaming it New York, and took Nutten Island, which had been left unfortified by the Dutch. The Island, however, switched hands between the British and the Dutch over the next 10 years until the British regained exclusive control of the Island for the "benefit and accommodation of His Majesty's Governors." Although it was not officially named until 1784, it thus came to be called Governors Island.

The Island's strategic location resulted in its use as a military facility by British and American forces for over 200 years. Following the British evacuation of New York in 1776, Americans fortified the Island in fear of further advances by the British navy. When fighting broke out in August, the English overpowered General George Washington and his men, and American forces retreated from Long Island and Governors Island. After the Revolution, the Island reverted back to New York State, and remained inactive for several years. In 1794, with the country in need of a system of coastal defenses, construction began on Fort Jay, on high ground in the center of the Island. In 1800, New York transferred the Island to the United States government for military purposes. Between 1806 and 1809, the Army reconstructed Fort Jay and built Castle Williams on a rocky outcropping facing the Harbor. During the War of 1812, artillery and infantry troops were concentrated on Governors Island.

The Island continued to serve an important military function until the 1960's. During the American Civil War, it was used for recruitment and as a prison for captured Confederate soldiers. Throughout World Wars I and II, the Island served as an important supply base for Army ground and air forces.

Physically, the Island changed greatly during the early twentieth century. Using rocks and dirt from the excavations for the Lexington Avenue Subway, the Army Corps of Engineers supervised the deposit of 4,787,000 cubic yards of fill on the south side of Governors Island, adding 103 acres of flat, treeless land by 1912, and bringing the total acreage of the Island to 172. In 1918, the Army built the Governors Island Railroad, which consisted of 1-¾ miles of track, and three flat cars carrying coal, machinery and supplies from the pier to shops and warehouses. Six years later, a municipal airport was proposed for the Island. Instead, Liggett Hall, a large structure designed by McKim, Mead & White, was built and became the first Army structure to house all of the facilities for an entire regiment.

With the consolidation of U.S. Military forces in 1966, the Island was transferred to the Coast Guard. This was the Coast Guard's largest installation, serving both as a self-contained residential community, with an on-Island population of approximately 3,500, and as a base of operations for the Atlantic Area Command and Maintenance and Logistics Command as well as the Captain of the Port of New York.

Over the years, Governors Island has served as the backdrop for a number of historic events. In 1986, the Island was the setting for the relighting of the newly refurbished Statue of Liberty by President Ronald Reagan. In 1988, President Reagan hosted a U.S.-U.S.S.R. summit with Mikhail Gorbachev on Governors Island, and in 1993 the U.N. sponsored talks on the Island to help restore democratic rule in Haiti.

In 1995, the Coast Guard closed its facilities on Governors Island and, as of September 1996, all residential personnel were relocated. President Clinton designated 22 acres of the Island, including the two great forts, as the Governors Island National Monument in January 2001, and on April 1, 2002, President George W. Bush, Governor Pataki, and Mayor Bloomberg announced that the United States of America would sell Governors Island to the people of New York for a nominal cost, and that the Island would be used for public benefit. At the time of the transfer, deed restrictions were created that prohibit permanent housing and casinos on the Island. The Island was transferred to the people of New York on January 31, 2003, through the Governors Island Preservation and Education Corporation.