

History of Governors Island

Name _____

Governor's island was originally used by the Lenape tribe (a group of Native Americans who lived in what is known as Manhattan today) for hunting and gathering. At this time the island was known as "Pagganack" (which means Nut Island) because of the many Hickory, Oak, and Chestnut trees. The Lenape would boat over to the island to gather nuts from the trees, and to fish from the waters. Additionally, at this time the Island was much smaller (only 70 acres compared to its 172 acres today).

1. Can you find an acorn or an acorn top?

In 1637, Wouter Van Tiller, the director general of the Dutch West India Company bought the island from the Native Americans for two axe heads, a handful of nails, and a string of beads. The Dutch re-named the Island "Noten Eylandt" after the Native American name. Wouter Van Tiller used the island for his own personal use (he had a farm, cattle, and a windmill) until the Dutch government confiscated it a year later.

2. Can you imagine what it would be like to have the whole island to yourself, what would you do with all of the space?

Eventually, in 1664, the British came and captured New Amsterdam, renaming it New York. They renamed the Island Governors Island and reserved it only for the use of colonial governors. At this point the Island only contained one house and pasture.

3. If you could make a new name for New York City or Governors Island, what would it be?

In the 1776, during the Revolutionary War, the Island was occupied by the British. However, at the end of the war in 1783 the British troops surrendered to the Continental troops and they withdrew from the city. The state of New York took over all of the land owned by the British, including Governors Island. In 1794, began to fortify the Harbor to defend the coast from enemies. This included the construction of Fort Jay which is here to this day.

4. If you were in charge of defending the coast from enemies, how would you do it? Would it be the same or different from how New York State did it over 300 years ago?



To the left is a very old drawing of Governors Island. What do you notice is the same or different about the Island and Manhattan in this picture compared to what it looks like today?

In 1800, New York transferred the Island to the United States government for military use. Over the next 15 years, the army reconstructed Fort Jay, built Castle Williams, and built South Battery. All three of which are still standing today! The construction of these fortresses prevented the British Invasion in New York.

5. Why do you think the construction of these three areas were able to prevent the British from invading New York?

During the American Civil War in the 1860's, the Island was no longer used as a primary physical defense. Instead, it was used to recruit and house new Union soldiers for the war. Fort Jay and Castle Williams were transformed into holding facilities for Confederate prisoners of war. High ranking officers were imprisoned in Fort Jay where they were able to stroll the island and live comfortably. Castle Williams, on the other hand, was reserved for enlisted prisoners. The conditions here were not as nice as there were almost 1,000 prisoners confined to a small space, it was cramped and dirty.

6. What do you see on Fort Jay that indicates to you that it was once a prison?

In the 1870's, the Army moved officers to the Island and built new general housing now known as Colonels Row. Over the next 10 years, the Island evolved from a small military outpost to an army headquarters. The Island became a neighborhood for enlisted men and their families.

7. Can you imagine living on the Island, what do you think it would be like? Would you like it or dislike it and why?

In the early 1900's, the Island changed greatly becoming more what it looks like today. Using rocks and dirt dug out from the Lexington Avenue Subway line, they filled the south half of the Island and it became the size and shape it is today (172 acres and ice cream cone shaped)! In 1909, Wilber Wright (one of the Wright brothers) used the Island to take off in one of the world's first flights. Spectators looked on from lower Manhattan to see a plane flying for the first time!



8. What do you think it would have been like for people to see a plane flying for the first time? What do you think it would have been like to be there?

During World War I and World War II, the Island remained a headquarters for the United States Army. In the 1960's the Army constructed apartment buildings on the southern portion of the Island (some of which are still standing next to the Teaching Garden). In 1964, due to changing technology and budget constraints, the Army closed the Island.

In 1966, the Governors Island was transferred to the Coast Guard. The island became home to about 3,000 members of the Coast Guard, and another 1,500 commuted back and forth from the city. The Coast Guard finally closed the Island in 1995. Everyone who lived there moved off and 92 acres became a Historic District.

9. Why do you think Governors Island was a good place for the Coast Guard?

In 2001, 22 acres of the island (including Fort Jay and Castle Williams) the Island became a National Monument to be managed by the National Park Service. In 2003, the government sold the remaining 150 acres of the Island to New York City and State. This sale made sure that the Island would be used for the public.

Now the Island is managed by the Trust for Governors Island. It is a public park that is open between May and October.

10. What do you think will happen to Governors Island in the future, will it remain a park? What else could it be? If you were in charge what would you put do with the Island? Use the back of this paper to draw a map of what you would like to do with the island.