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Dauids Island Fades Into History in Tale of Two Isles

By Noreen O'Donnell

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Governors Island is just seven minutes off the up of Manhattan. The former military post is a quick, and free, ferry ride away.

Step off the boat, and Castle Williams and Fort Jay are reminders of the role the island played from the Revolutionary War until the Coast Guard withdrew in 1995. Stately brick homes make up Colonels' Row and face Liggett Hall with its look of a college campus. Yellow wood frame houses that were once home to officers circle a green.

It was here that in 1988, President Ronald Reagan hosted a U.S.-USSR summit with Mikhail Gorbachev, and that in 1993, the United Nations sponsored talks to help restore democratic rule in Haiti.

Today, the 172-acre island is a public park, open Friday through Sunday from the end of May to the middle of October. It's a large backyard for the city with space for badminton, hammocks, picnics, concerts, even a Water Taxi Beach next the ferry dock. New York State took over the island from the federal government six year ago, and it is planning a mix of educational and arts facilities while preserving the historic buildings, now empty and dilapidated.

It is everything Davids Island, a similar if smaller island off New Rochelle, did not become.

Why is the redevelopment of Governors Island succeeding while that of Davids Island failed? Why is the history of Davids Island a series of missed chances for a comparable jewel in the Long Island Sound?

"What they're doing that didn't happen to Davids Island is getting people out there to understand it, appreciate it and therefore protect it," said Barbra Davis,

New Rochelle's historian. "That's why we were missing. Once it closed, it was abandoned, there was no access and it was not to public consciousness."

The New Rochelle edition of the series "images of America," which Davis wrote, includes a chapter on Davids Island and the variety of military functions it served during the Civil War. Nearly 5,000 men were ferried to the island to be treated in DeCamp Hospital. During World War I, in a two-year period from 1917 to 1919, about 140,000 men passed through Fort Slocum on their way to war. It was the busiest recruiting depot east of the Mississippi River, Davis wrote.

In 1967, the Army turned the island over to New Rochelle. The city considered a number of proposals for it, everything from an exclusive luxury development by Donald Trump to a Westchester County owned park, but all of the drawings and plans came to nothing.

The island stayed vacant and time and vandals did their damage.

In the end, Rep. Nita Lowey, the Democrat from New Rochelle, got federal money to clean it up, and by December all 90 buildings came down.

"People would say to me once they started the demolition, 'How could this happen, how could New Rochelle allow this to happen?'" David said. "There was not a huge hue or cry, because people didn't really know about it, or understand it."

Historians and others wanted to save some of the buildings – from restoring them to their original state of as a ruin, to preserving the façade or the footprint – but people did not know why they should care, Davis said.

New Rochelle ultimately could not afford to take over financial responsibility for any of them.

"When they first closed Governors Island, I felt like writing a letter saying, 'Use Davids Island as your example. Don't let it happen, what happened to Davids Island, happen to Governors Island, because basically it's the same thing but on a smaller scale, which is a self-contained, really attractive, really well-preserved space with buildings with interesting architecture and interesting former uses,'" Davis said. "Even just walking around ... you feel like your poking around in history."

"You would have at Davids Island, too," she said.

On Governors Island this summer, a public arts group called Creative Time has installed exhibits in buildings and on the lawns, a quirky miniature golf course behind Liggert Hall among them.

Meanwhile other work is beginning.. Ninety-two of its acres on the northern end of the island have been designed a historic landmark district and encompasses the 18th century fortifications, arsenal buildings from before the Civil War, Victorian and Romanesque Revival houses and early 20th Century Neoclassical architecture. On the southern portion, barracks and warehouses will be torn down and replaced with parkland.

The future of Davids Island is still uncertain, but its history is not entire lost.

Records, photographs, oral histories, maps and documentation for all of the buildings have been kept and, in October, a virtual exhibit will be unveiled on Westchester County's virtual archives Website.

"It's not the real thing, it's just virtual, but it will provide greater access," Davis said.

After all the disappointments – the lemons so to speak – she had this to say: "That's the lemonade here."