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Isle's Last Silhouette Razed

Fort Slocum Water Tower Topped on Davids Island

By Theresa Juva

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NEW ROCHELLE – With the slow tug of a bulldozer, dozens of tons of steel gracefully tumbled to the ground on Davids Island yesterday morning.

The rusted water tower was the final structure to be demolished on the 80-acre island and former military post. It was also marked the end of a \$26 million Army Corps of Engineers project that tore down 90 buildings, which were once part of Fort Slocum. The fort, used from the Civil War to World War II, was once the largest military recruiting depot east of the Mississippi River and served the Army and Air Force.

"It has been an icon for Slocum," Barbara Davis, the city's historian, said of the water tower before it was pulled down. "It is the last remnant of the island visible from the shore."

About a dozen city and county officials gathered on a hill to watch the 100-foot water tower crumble.

Jeffrey Coleman, commissioner of the city's Department of Public Works, said yesterday's event was a milestone in the overall cleanup of the island.

"It's a potential hazardous situation," Coleman said of the island's vacant and dilapidated buildings. "It's an unsecured island, and it's very easy for people to come on a kayak. (The demolitions) gets rid of a significant hazard. It makes the island safer."

Eliminating environmental risks is the next step in preparing the site for development. The county, city, and state recently funded a \$1 million examination that showed PCB, lead, and chemical contamination in the soil. Public hearings in the next few months will address how the cleanup will be handled, Coleman said.

“The level of cleanup will determine the type of development,” he said. “Our goal of cleanup is to allow for recreation.”

A public park, recreation center, military museum, commercial development or a combination have been discussed for the island.

Davis said she had hoped more of the fort’s past would have been preserved. Some 30 buildings were identified as having historical or architectural significance, but because the city couldn’t guarantee funding for their restoration, they were destroyed, she said.

“I think everybody, even some people in the demolition crew, everybody felt it would have been the best outcome had there been some buildings to remain to tell the story of Fort Slocum.” Davis said.

The military abandoned the fort in the mid-1960s and transferred the ownership to the city. Nature’s wrath gradually tightened its grip on the buildings as they fell into disrepair over the years.

“There is a great deal of sadness.” Davis said. “They call them the ‘glory days’ of Fort Slocum, when it was a pristine, self-contained community and beautifully maintained.”

Even though none of the buildings were saved. Davis said maps, photographs and oral histories from former residents were gathered for an online museum. Mini forts for artillery, pathways, the tennis courts, and the Rodman Gun Monument were also preserved.

Ensuring the island flourishes in the future will take strong commitment. Davis said.

“There needs to be a great deal of public support,” she said. “In the short term, what I hope is the great minds of Westchester will start thinking carefully about the future of the island for the best purposes of the public good. For it to be a viable ecosystem, it will take a tremendous amount of work.