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News and Stories from Governors Island

Regional Plan Association /
Governors Island Alliance

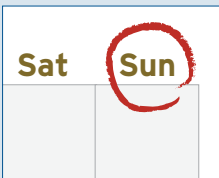
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Governors Island will Open on Sundays!



Governors Island will be open to visitors on Sundays this year for the first time, starting the first weekend in June. In the past few years it has been open

on Fridays and Saturdays. Now it will be open Saturdays and Sundays, from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Long advocated by public officials and the Alliance, the new schedule opens the island to even more visitors.

Concerts, workshops and festivals, starting with the Alliance's Family Festival on Saturday, June 2, are scheduled throughout the summer. See you then!

GIPEC's Plan for a Plan

GIPEC's guidelines for the five professional teams competing to design the Island's open spaces – the March 7 Request for Proposals (RFP) – covers a meticulous 82 pages of text, maps and graphics. Highlights are: roughly 40 acres of parkland dubbed “Summer Park” running the length of the southern half of the Island and fronting on the harbor, a 2.18-mile public promenade and bikeway circling the Island, new definitions for historic sectors of the northern half, a “transition zone” between the two halves, and a new dock to replace Tango Pier on Buttermilk Channel. The RFP is on-line at http://www.govisland.com/About_GIPEC/park_design_rfp.asp. You can also look at the Alliance's open space guidelines at www.governorsislandalliance.org.

The five teams are to present their concepts starting in May, with a public exhibit running through much of June. GIPEC and a jury of “distinguished design professional and government officials” will then pick a team or teams to



develop the final plan for the open spaces – the basic template that will allot spaces and create an atmosphere for other uses.

The over-all objective set forth in the RFP is to create a destination, not just another playground but a unique attraction. “The destination and experiences offered by the Island's public open spaces must justify the effort of the jour-

ney.” (Incidentally, it indicates that GIPEC is still considering an aerial gondola to get people there from Manhattan and Brooklyn.)

SUMMER PARK The RFP sets the tone for this space by pointing out that “it is crucial to the overall vision of the park to understand and make the most of its inherent Island nature.” The

guidelines contemplate that this waterfront park will begin at Division Road on the south side of Building 400, flanked on both sides by non-profit or commercial uses yet to be determined. The open space will stretch to the southern tip of the island, joining the waterfront along most of the western shoreline facing the harbor and the Statue of Liberty.

The RFP mentions that the park needs to include space for organized sports, and possibly even for rock climbing and extreme sports. It says the design teams “should also consider the role of the arts” – music, performance, sculpture – and it strongly suggests positioning an amphitheater outside the park space, near the southernmost end of the Buttermilk Channel space, with lawn seating extending into the park.

PROMENADE Mincing no words, the RFP says that “The Great Promenade will be one of the world’s most extraordinary, distinct and enchanting walks.” The path that circles the Island would be a minimum of 52 feet wide “where practicable,” primarily for walking, biking and skating “but also getting down to touch the water, bird watching, fishing, exploring and learning about harbor marine life.” There would be “Promenade Plazas” and “Promenade Pockets” at intervals where people could gather or rest and there might be outdoor cafés.

The RFP encourages “creative solutions” that modify the edge of the Island, such as breaching the seawall to create an inland body of water, tidal wetlands and habitats, and access for canoes and kayaks. Citing difficult physical conditions, it discourages facilities for private boat landings or a commercial marina, although it does not rule them out.

HISTORIC DISTRICT “The physical environment of the North Island will remain essentially as it exists today,” the RFP says. It recognizes that the area under GIPEC’s control surrounds the Governors Island National Monument, and that these two open spaces must blend. Views of the Lower Manhattan skyline from the Parade Ground should be preserved, it says, and all vestiges of the old golf course “should be eliminated and re-contoured.” It could be adapted for recreation, or preserved for its historic value as a slope (glacis) leading up to Fort Jay. Some “non-conforming” buildings that don’t fit the over-all historic surroundings can be demolished and replaced with suitable structures, it says.

TRANSITION ZONE This is the space spanning the island from shore to shore, where Building 400 and a half-dozen smaller buildings are located. The RFP calls it “an opportunity for a well-designed transition from the historic buildings on the north side of Division Road to new construction and development on the south side.” It visualizes shaded seating areas, paths and assorted comings and goings around the buildings.

GETTING THERE The RFP anticipates that the existing Soissons ferry dock will continue to be “a primary point” for ferry traffic but ad-

ditional “access points” will likely be necessary, connecting the Island to Brooklyn and other harbor locations as well as Manhattan. Tango Pier and part of Yankee Pier will be demolished, and Tango replaced by a new dock. As for an aerial gondola, “this conceptual idea is in the early stages of feasibility analyses.”

Historic Castle Williams

Castle Williams was built in the early 1800s to defend New York against the possibility that the British would try to regain the American colonies they had lost only a decade earlier. Originally bristling with three tiers of cannon, it rises at the waterfront facing the Statue of Liberty, one of the two forts – the other is Fort Jay – that comprise the Governors Island National Monument, the 22-acre section of the Island under the jurisdiction of the National Park Service.

Its name comes from its designer, Colonel John Williams, Chief Engineer in the Army Corps of Engineers and first Superintendent of the Military Academy at West Point – also a nephew of Benjamin Franklin.

Castle Williams, completed in 1811, and its twin, Castle Clinton on the Battery in Manhattan, were part of the newly independent country’s

defensive construction known as the “second system.” Fort Jay, completed in 1808, was part of the “first system.” While none of these fortifications saw battle in the War of 1812, the very lack of action was an achievement as they had been constructed as much to deter attack as to fight off an enemy invasion. Castle Williams, with its high profile, was the prototype for a harbor oriented defense that offered concentrated firepower. Some scholars consider it to be the finest and most important example of its type in U.S. coastal fortifications.

During the Civil War it functioned as a supposedly escape-proof military prison, but Captain William Robert Webb of the 2nd North Carolina Cavalry proved famously that it wasn’t. A few days before the end of the war he went over the wall and swam to Manhattan. When he explained to people why he was wandering around in dressed in rebel greys he told the truth and – disbelieving or uninterested – they let him wander. Years later he was elected to the Senate.

Grover Cleveland Bergdoll, the most notorious draft dodger of the first World War was sentenced in January 1920 to five years of hard labor in Castle Williams, but five months later, under guard on a trip to his home in Penn-



Castle Williams



sylvania, he slipped away and fled to Germany. Returning to America in 1939, as Congress was about to exile him forever, he was again incarcerated on the Island.

Castle Williams was also the base for a failed demonstration of the telegraph by its inventor, Samuel F. B. Morse. He laid a wire across the harbor to Castle Clinton, aiming to show how his miraculous device could speed messages between remote places, but a ship dragging its anchor broke the wire and the demonstration didn't happen.

When the Island was transferred to the Coast Guard in 1966, the Castle was converted to a community center. The halls that once held prisoners became a nursery for the children of Coast Guard families posted on the Island. A legacy of asbestos insulation, lead paint and general deterioration make its winding stone staircase and narrow jail cells off-limits for now. Representative Jerrold Nadler is leading the effort to allocate \$5 million for this work in the NPS Construction Budget for fiscal 2008. For now, only the large interior court is open to the public.

In its new life as a National Monument, Castle Williams's layered history faces yet another transformation. The Park Service's preliminary draft of the General Management Plan for the Monument sees it as the Island's exhibition and history center, focused on harbor themes – its defense, history and ecology. A unique year-round observation deck would offer spectacular views of the whole harbor from the top of its solid 8-foot-thick masonry walls. After completing the draft and final General Management Plan, scheduled for later this year, the Park Service may seek to carry out their plan with a private non-profit organization. One such group - the New Globe Theatre - wants to fit a replica of Shakespeare's circular Globe Theater into the circular courtyard. The Management Plan will provide the criteria for determining whether such a use is compatible.

The Park Service Listens

Over 100 people turned out for the National Park Service's March 18 "Listening" session at Federal Hall - the recently refurbished historic site on Wall Street. Maria Burks, Commissioner of the National Parks of New York Harbor, introduced the National Park Centennial Initiative, a 10-year project to "invigorate" the park system by 2016, the centennial of its creation in the administration of President Woodrow Wilson. Sandy Walter, Acting Director of the Northeast Region (from Maine to Virginia) reported that the President's budget for fiscal year 2008 proposes up to \$3 billion for investment in parks, trails, memorials and historic sites that will help start the process.

The object of this session, and others like it around the country, was to gather people's thoughts about the parks ten years from now. The audience had more thoughts about programs than projects - such as better educational collaboration between schools and national parks, and greater inter-connection among the parks in the New York region. The Island was represented

by Linda Neal, superintendent of the Governors Island National Monument - one of 13 superintendents on hand from 13 NPS sites in the tri-state area. The audience was a mix of citizens, school advocates, park enthusiasts, parents with children, and many Alliance members. Suzanne Wertz of AIA New York Chapter and Rob Freudenberg of the Alliance staff spoke for the Island as a signature National Park for all New Yorkers to celebrate our maritime heritage and the historic importance of the several strategic forts. For information about the Centennial Challenge, go to www.nps.gov/partnerships/challenge.htm. Alliance member National Parks Conservation Association is collecting suggestions for new projects, new parks, and new programs for centennial. You can write them at nero@npca.org.

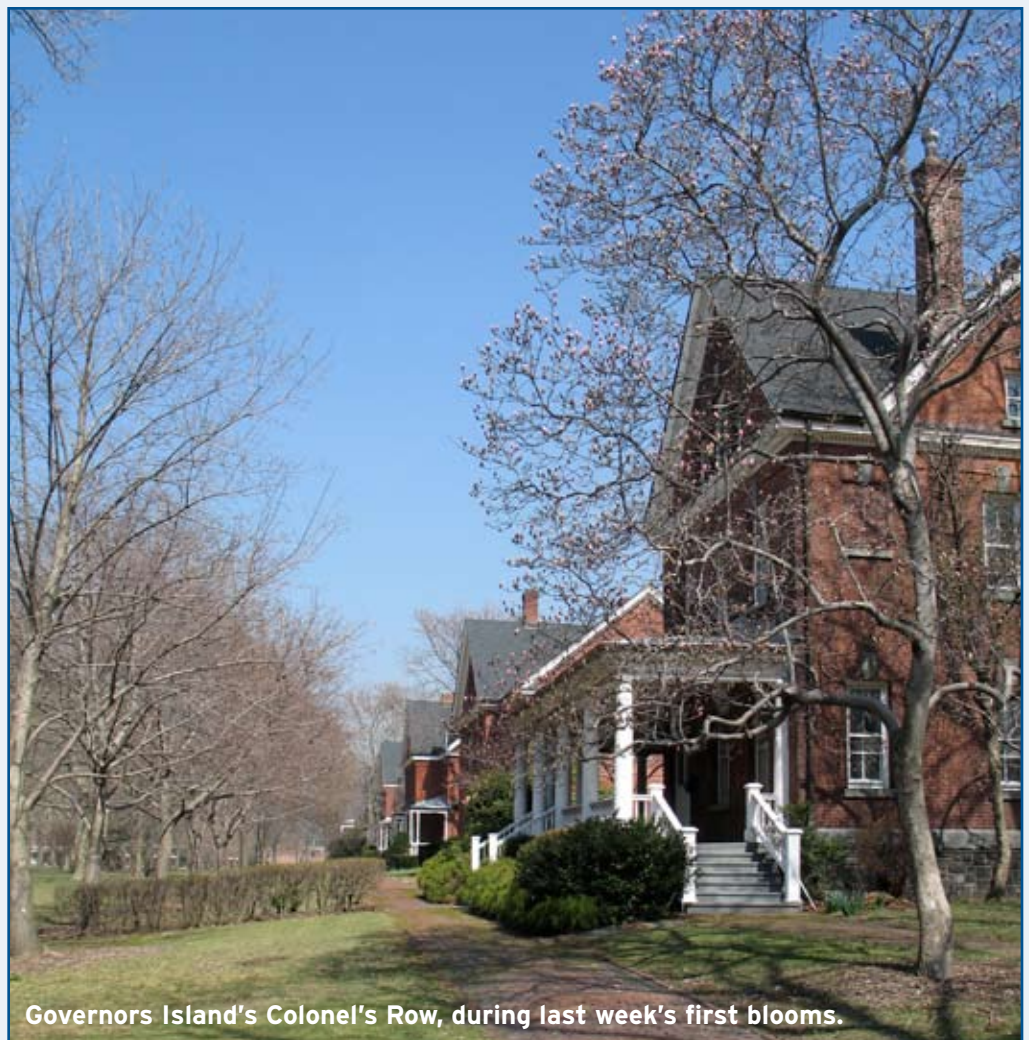
Quick Fix

Was the Island's first name Pagganck or Nooten Eylandt? In the most recent issue of Online-Offshore, we stated that the original Native American name of Governors Island, Pagganck (which has various spellings), was changed to Nooten Eylandt (Nut Island) when the Dutch purchased it in 1637. One careful reader suggested that the reverse was true, that the Dutch name had been translated into the Lenape language. Our conversations with a few Island historians suggest that the true answer is up for debate. Another Governors Island mystery found!

GIPEC Board Adopts \$22.2 million Budget

GIPEC's directors have adopted a \$22,230,000 operating budget for the new fiscal year that began April 1 – a 38 percent increase over last year. The budget increase was attributed to the costs of increased public access. The April 17 board meeting was the first since November and reflected the outcome of last November's election. Patrick Foye, Governor Spitzer's nominee to head the Empire State Development Corp., will become the state's co-chairman of GIPEC when his ESDC appointment is confirmed by the state Senate. Foye is the former president and CEO of United Way of Long Island. He will replace Governor Pataki's representative, Mallory Factor, who announced his resignation and expressed a hope that Island development will "go forward at a more rapid pace." Albert K. Butzel, representing the Alliance, spoke up at the meeting to urge Mr. Foye to press Albany to pick up its share of the Island's capital budget.

Save the Date
Governors Island
Opening Day
Family Festival
June 2nd, 2007 • 12:30 to 4



Governors Island's Colonel's Row, during last week's first blooms.