



Citizens polish a gem in New Castle

Take on reclamation of Fort Stark at entrance of Portsmouth Harbor

Story by Bill (Pappou) Drew, Photos by Pappou and Jim Cerny

Immersed in the environment around us, we're challenged to have vision and dream. The New Hampshire seacoast has been utilized for a variety of purposes determined by the necessities of the times.



Entrance to Little Harbor with Odiorne Point at lower left, Fort Stark at lower right, with the Wentworth Hotel and Navy Yard in the distance. circa. 1970

Prior to the settlement of New Hampshire 400 ago the Sachems or Sagamores, the "kings of Algonquian Indian tribes, used the area as a base of operations as they roamed in search of fish and fowl." For the settlers, the remoteness of Odiorne Point (peninsula at left) provided a safe haven, an oasis, from which to reap the stores of the ocean and to obtain a foothold in this vast undeveloped land. The level ground across the small inlet to Little Harbor, at the southeastern tip of what is now New Castle (peninsula at right) was used for further settlement. Early permanent structures were constructed here. The necessity of deep water close to the shore, to conduct the necessities of trade, moved the base of operations and settlement around the corner to the riverside of New Castle and then further upstream to what is now Portsmouth and Dover Point. Odiorne and Jerry's Point (now officially known as Jaffrey Point) were all but abandoned except for a few families that carried on in agrarian pursuits and in harvesting the sea.

These shoreline locations, provide views of the river entrance as well as distant views of the Isles of Shoals and boat and ship activity moving along the coast. Most likely it was the site of the first "fortifications" in the Piscataqua River Basin. One hundred and fifty years later, in the latter part of the 17th century, the British viewed this land as an outpost, then fortress, to protect the increasing value of its resources and investment in the area. As the years rolled by, military occupation and its own form of development varied with increased technology and the level of enemy threats to the area. In the latter part of the 1800's and all through the first half of the 20th century various defensive fortifications were constructed to protect the coastline and challenge invaders.



Google Earth Photo of Fort Stark Peninsula as viewed from high over the Atlantic ocean - Taken in about the year 2002

In New Castle, this 10-acre area point of land at the southeastern end of the island became known as Fort Stark in honor of New Hampshire's General John Stark, the commander of the Battle of Bennington (1777) in the Revolutionary War. It is one of the seven forts built in the surrounding region of the Piscataqua River.

After World War II, Fort Stark was used as an area of military training and finally in 1978 and 1983 turned over to the State of New Hampshire for the use as a state park. Since then, it has been discarded and been moved under the table: out of sight, out of mind.



Overgrowth in bunker support area

John Albee, New Castle historian, wrote in 1885 that "vandals were at work in the Fort Stark area as the nature of military facilities, no longer needed, became abandoned." Today, the relatively unknown location and lack of interest and state funding leave it in a condition of neglect. This condition has provided the modern generation an unhindered opportunity to expand its creative artistic pursuits in the way of graffiti and indulge in numerous undesirable and illegal

activities. The result? The Fort's further lack of attention and use for historical and family outing experiences or other recreational activities.



Graffiti in the observation deck of the upper floor of the HECF (Harbor Entrance Control Post) Building

I became involved with Fort Stark years ago as my children and their friends used it as a playground. It is like a Disney experience in real life complete with dark endless passages, with boys making weird sounds getting the girls to squeal, all of which adds to its mystical flavor. Flashlights are needed to move around. The huge outside concrete structures invite those to traverse and test: Who has the most "guts"? The main observation building (HECF-the Harbor Entrance Control Post) is a massive vertical concrete structure, which when climbed to the top, provides the most outstanding and magnificent view in the seacoast region. There are vistas on all sides, 360 degrees: Atlantic Ocean, Isles of Shoals, Lighthouses, River entrance, Odiornes Point, Little Harbor, Civilization. It's a thrill to be on top of the local geographical scene, although getting there, as I did last week, is a bit scary, in fact very scary. Look at the last set of stairs on the upper level in the photo. They are very narrow with no railing.



The Front of the HECP - the Harbor Entrance Control Building

With children now grown, I have given little thought to Fort Stark. It's been just there, at the end of Wild Rose Lane. Forgotten. A few months ago, on Thursday, May 5th at the weekly men's get-together for coffee and talk, New Castle Police Chief Jim Murphy mentioned his frustration with the deteriorating situation at Fort Stark, his involvement with a lingering dog issue, and the nocturnal arrival and illegal use by undesirable individuals and groups. He said that sooner or later a dead body would show up there. The dog issue had run its course. The limits were defined. With the other, the chief said he was at the point of contacting the state and requesting them to put a fence around it and "locking it up." He went on to say that if something could be done to clean it up and make it look "lived in" and some pride taken in the property, that it would assist his situation.

Discussion within the group was "how can the problem be addressed?" "What is needed?" Perhaps a visit was in order, so on Thursday, May 31st, the group met at Fort Stark and observed the conditions. More discussion ensued, and no clear cut path to improvement was determined. Two weeks later on Friday, June 15th, a "gift" arrived. It was two busloads of "City-Help" (a associate group of AmeriCorps) young people who spent the day beginning the cleanup of Fort Stark. A sign post was erected, some visible graffiti removed, the "machine shop" building painted, and some overgrown areas of brush removed.



City-Help workers removing graffiti and painting the machine shop building trim

Three days later, on Monday, June 18th, a pre-scheduled tour by NH Legislators and members of interested groups viewed Seacoast-area State Park sites, among them Fort Stark. Their determination: It's a beautiful spot, but we have no money to spend on it." The dilemma continues. The State, deeming the area a low priority, has overlooked the situation for 25 years. The town has yet to make up its collective mind about Fort Stark. Some local police surveillance is performed to help show some signs of activity. The deplorable situation continues to exist and gets worse.



A visit by New Hampshire Legislators expressing support to local residents

ACTION:

Some members of the men's group formed the Fort Stark Brigade. An ex-Marine led the way. A N.H. State representative took on a leadership role, both in contacting various state groups and manning a powered brush-cutting machine. A conservation commission member did his part with physical labor as well as guidance of the group's activities.



Work Team # 1 Ellen Garvey, Peter Rice, David Borden, Max Drawert, Curt Gillespie

Women soon joined the group as did a retired Portsmouth restaurateur. Other organizations in town, such as the Fire Department, Police Department, Historical Society, Garden Club and Neighbor's Group supported the cause. The word is out, and others join the effort.



Deb Tillar doing the routine task of Cut and Haul, over and over



Ellen Garvey, working the fence area

Reclamation #1 was on July 10th. In conjunction with approval and assistance from Seacoast Park Director, Brian Warburton, there was removal of brush from the western beach side of the parade ground. Now, a fleet of pleasure boats came into view and it was as if Fort Stark had been awakened and come alive again. Weekly efforts by these and other individuals, with continued help and support of state Parks personnel, resulted in not only a cleaned up look, but one that shows activity and habitation. It's a deterrent to illegal use of the area and, according to the police, that problem has been considerably reduced. The word it out. Fort Stark is no longer uninhabited and forgotten.



Gary Bashline of NH State Parks goes over plans with Rand Bussey of Ricci Construction



Andres Borden splitting block

In Reclamation #6, on Wednesday, August 15th, the initiation of security

improvements began. Ricci Construction provided cement, concrete blocks, manpower, and equipment, and the operation of sealing up passages, deemed to be a threat to security, began. The result will be a further sign of the intention of the restoration of Fort Stark.



Curt Gillespie manning the powered brush cutter



Stu Hume, age 80, hauling brush



Curt Gillespie and Sam Jarvis cut away to expand the view

A World War II veteran from Rye, Lester Stevens, makes an appearance. He describes, on a walking tour, the interesting aspects of the location when he was stationed in the area more than 60 years ago.



To Carol White, Lester Stevens points out features he encountered during his service at Fort Stark during World War II



What will happen in the future? An article titled "to rescue a fallen soldier," by Patrick Law, in a recent issue of the on-line publication, *The Wire*, provides an excellent summary of the many agendas, positions, and bleak consequences espoused by the various parties and government agencies involved. His last sentence says it all. "For the time being, no one seems to have the will to breathe new life into Fort Stark." Will and vitality have arrived. A group has been formed called the "Friends of Fort Stark." It's composed of individuals and groups that have expressed an interest in preserving this unique environment. A Council of Stewards will assist in focusing directions to accomplish the mission.

Mission Underway-It's a thumbs up from Jenny Rosenson and Peter Rice

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For more information see Patrick Law's [article in The Wire](#) and Pete Payette's [military history of Fort Stark](#).

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