Coastal Defenses in Narragansett

From the earth works of a Revolutionary fort to the concrete bunkers of World War II, military installations have been an important part of Narragansett Bay history. This self-guided tour includes a privately built “bungalow,” Fort Nathanael Greene, Fort Varnum, the Bonnet Battery and Fort Kearney.

1. Kinney Bungalow at Sunset Farm, 505 Point Judith Road, was built by Francis Kinney in 1899 as a private clubhouse for post-polo game parties. During WW I it was used by the Red Cross and during WW II by the US Army as a communications post for Fort Nathanael Greene.

Fort Nathanael Greene consisted of three parcels. East Reservation (known as Battery Hamilton) is currently used by the Army Reserve. The West and South Reservations are open to the public. Battery Hamilton and Battery 109 (West Reservation) were built for giant 16" rifles with a range of 26 miles in casements under 20 to 25 feet of reinforced concrete, steel, and earth. The rifles were placed 500 feet apart connected by a system of adjoining underground concrete chambers for ammunition, power generation and communication.

2. West Reservation (Battery 109), Fisherman’s Memorial State Park, 1011 Point Judith Road (RI 108) was built to look like a farm. Battery 109, to the left of the entrance road, 80 feet high and 400 feet long, was never completed. Four of the support buildings remain in use today: A concrete silo across from the battery, which was a fire-control tower; a 1½ story wood shingled, gambrel roof “barn” used as an ordnance repair shop; a one-story wood shingled ordnance material and supply warehouse and a one-story shop used for motor repair. Please Note: Except for the Gansett Days tour, there is no access during camping season, April 10 to October 31.

3. South Reservation (Battery 211): Take Route 108 south toward the lighthouse and turn right on to Ocean Road, turn right on to a dirt road to Point Judith Fishermen’s Memorial at Cronin’s Beach. The South Reservation had buildings designed to resemble cottages. Battery 211 was equipped with 5" batteries mounted on barbette carriages protected by naval turrets. Remains can be seen near the water’s edge. Walk to the top of the earth covered ammunition bunker for views of the Lighthouse to the east and Galilee to the west.

4. Standing in the compass at the top of the mound, look directly over the North indicator, into the trees to see a concrete observation post just before the residential neighborhood. It would have had a wooden façade to look like a cottage.

5. Proceed north on Ocean Road. Just before Scarborough Beach on the right, the property to the east was once a part of the West Reservation. When the leaves are off the trees, a fire tower is visible. The entrance road is private. Please do not enter.

Please use caution when visiting the sites on this tour. The full tour, including the walk at Fort Varnum, takes approximately two hours.

Continue along Ocean Road through Narragansett Pier on Route 1A, Boston Neck Road. After crossing Sprague Bridge over Narrow River take an immediate right on to Old Boston Neck Road and drive 1/3 of a mile. Continue straight onto a dirt road with a small parking lot on the right. Leave your car and walk east approximately 15 minutes to views of Fort Varnum and the rocky ocean coast. You can walk along the chain length fence for views of Whale Rock with the remains of a lighthouse. Warning: The path is rough in spots with rocks, logs and cut-off posts.

6. Construction on Fort Varnum was begun in 1942. It was built to appear as an oceanside village. The red, blue, yellow and gray “cottages” still hold concrete observation and fire control towers which transmitted aiming data to Fort Greene. Three-inch and six-inch rifles were installed in earth covered concrete structures near the water’s edge. The visible mound within the fencing is a magazine. Poured concrete circular gun blocks that held 37mm and 90mm guns are still visible. These guns were used for anti-motor torpedo boat operations. Fort Varnum is now used by the R.I. National Guard.

7. Return to your car, drive north on Route 1A and turn right on Bonnet Shores Road and then bear right on to Bonnet Point Road, drive to the end of the road and then turn left on to Col. John Gardner Road. Opposite house #251 are the small remaining earthworks of the Bonnet Battery visible around a small field. A plaque states that the Bonnet Battery was captured from the British in 1778. It was garrisoned for a month in 1863 during the Civil War. Return to Route 1A north (Boston Neck Road) and turn right on to South Ferry Road toward the URI Bay Campus. Near the end of the road turn right into the Beach Parking Lot on Aquarium Road. Steps at the end of the upper lot lead to a path to the batteries of Fort Kearney.

8. Fort Kearney, one of five permanent forts guarding the entrance to Narragansett Bay, dates from 1901, was manned during WW I and was reactivated in 1941. The first battery, Armistad, housed two 3” barbette guns separated by a grassed over magazine. Next to it the Cram battery housed two 6” disappearing rifles. During WW II an anti-motor torpedo boat battery and two 37mm guns were on site. An anti-boat boom was laid from here to Fort Getty in Jamestown directly across the West Passage. The anchor for the boom is located at the water’s edge to the south of the dock. The fort also housed German prisoners of war who wrote a German language newspaper for distribution to other POW camps.

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The base maps were scanned from Rhode Island Street Atlas (South Easton, Mass.: American Map, 2003).