

# MUSEUM FEATURE

## HARBOR DEFENSE MUSEUM

By Justin M. Batt

School groups end their visit with lunch on the Bluff, overlooking the Narrows.

Nestled within the heart of Bay Ridge, Brooklyn, the Harbor Defense Museum preserves the history of New York City's coastal defenses. The museum is part of the Army Museum Enterprise and is an annex of the West Point Museum. All activities at the museum focus on achieving the museum's mission, which, as defined by the U.S. Army Center of Military History, is to collect, preserve, exhibit, and interpret historically significant materiel related to the history of U.S. Army Garrison Fort Hamilton and the seacoast defenses in New York.

The only Army museum in New York City, the Harbor Defense Museum has a fine collection of military artifacts. A large portion of the collection—2,838 items—originally was part of the Fort Wadsworth Military Museum on Staten Island. Established in 1966, that museum remained open until 1979, when the U.S. Army ceased operations at Fort Wadsworth. On 11 June 1980, the Harbor Defense Museum opened its doors for the first time at Fort

Hamilton. About 125 artifacts are on display at any given time.

The museum is housed in the original caponier—a freestanding bastion located in the dry moat that was designed to defend the rear of the original fortification. The caponier itself, considered one of the finest examples of such a structure in the United States, is the museum's most precious artifact. It has survived largely intact, preserving many of the fort's original architectural elements, which have been lost elsewhere to renovations.

The museum's storyline focuses on generations of harbor defenses from 1794 to 1950, as seen through the eyes of Fort Hamilton and the surrounding fortifications in the New York City area. Within this storyline is an exhibit dedicated to the Battle of Long Island (1776), which began on the grounds that Fort Hamilton sits on today.

Fort Hamilton is one of the oldest continuously serving U.S. Army installations in the country. Built between 1825 and 1831, Fort Hamilton was part of a system of fortifications erected throughout New York City. The fort is named in honor of distin-

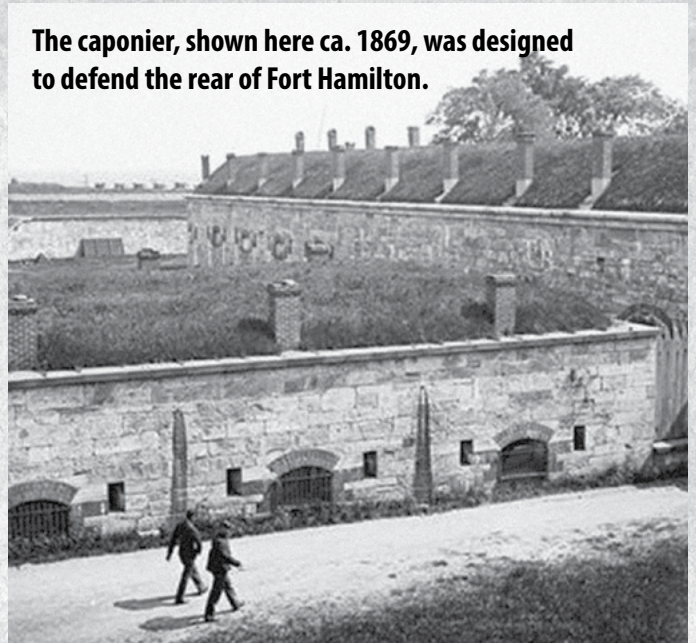




**In this aerial photograph, Fort Hamilton's large guns can be seen along the shoreline, ca. 1930.**

guished Revolutionary War officer Maj. Gen. Alexander Hamilton. The fort had two missions. The first was to support actions against enemy warships seeking to pass through The Narrows—the primary entrance into New York City's harbor. Its second was to defend against land-based infantry attacks. Fort Hamilton's last gun was removed in 1948.

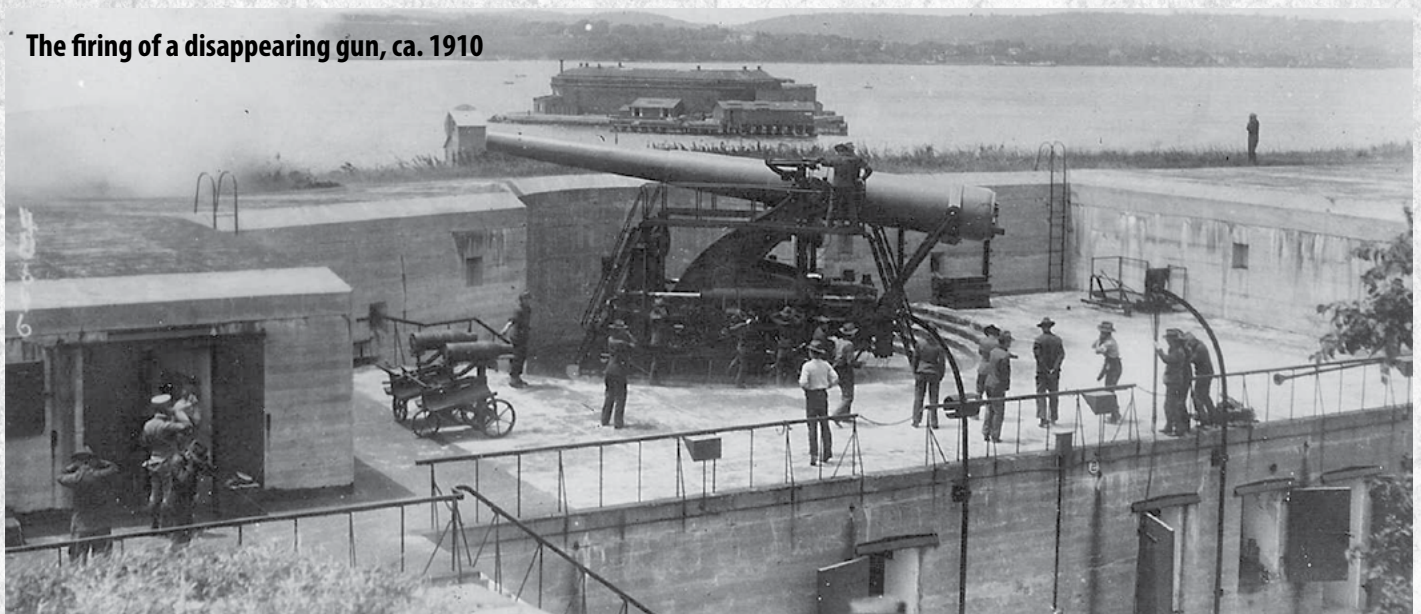
The museum is committed to providing training and educational opportunities to all soldiers of the U.S. Army, as well as other service members, veterans, and civilians. It welcomes tour groups of all kinds and offers a guided tour of the museum along with a



**The caponier, shown here ca. 1869, was designed to defend the rear of Fort Hamilton.**



**Fort Hamilton's seacoast-facing wall, ca. 1875**



**The firing of a disappearing gun, ca. 1910**



**The Harbor Defense Museum is located inside the historic caponier.**



**A docent and a soldier discuss the purpose of a 24-pounder flank howitzer, which was used to defend against land-based infantry attacks.**







The sixty-first superintendent of the U.S. Military Academy, Lt. Gen. Steven W. Gilland, points out Fort Lafayette, which is located on an island in the Narrows, in a museum exhibit.

structured classroom program, which is tailored for various grade levels. The education programs focus on the development of harbor defenses in the New York City area, a program on the history of Fort Hamilton, and an engaging presentation on the Battle of Long Island. Included in the Battle of Long Island program is a demonstration of loading and firing a flintlock musket. The tour concludes on the bluff, which provides a spectacular view of The Narrows.

The Harbor Defense Museum is located on U.S. Army Garrison Fort Hamilton, Brooklyn, New York. Hours of operation are Tuesday–Friday, 1000–1600. The museum is free and open to the public. Although not required, scheduling an appointment is recommended before visiting the museum. Nonmilitary visitors require a valid photo ID and a visitor pass. For more information, please call 718-630-4349 or visit the museum’s website at <https://history.army.mil/museums/IMCOM/fortHamilton/index.html>.

**Justin M. Batt** is the curator of the Harbor Defense Museum.



Students pose for a group shot during their field trip. Many schools from the New York City area visit the museum to learn more about Fort Hamilton and the U.S. Army.