

Fort Constitution

History of the Park

Fort Constitution is one of seven forts built to protect Portsmouth Harbor. The others in New Hampshire are: Fort Washington, Fort Stark and Fort Dearborn (Odiorne Point State Park); and in Maine: Fort Sullivan, Fort McClary and Fort Foster.

The earliest forts were built to protect the colonists. As Portsmouth Harbor's importance increased with the Revolutionary War shipbuilding industry and the establishment of the Portsmouth Naval Shipyard in 1800, additional fortification was needed.

Following the Spanish American War (1898), the improved defense of key harbors became a national priority. Fortifications such as Fort Constitution were constructed on both coasts during the Endicott Period (1890-1920) and at Forts Stark, McClary and Foster. The basic defense concept was to mine the harbor entrances and erect gun batteries.

The final coastal fortification occurred during World War II when batteries were added to Fort Foster, and Fort Dearborn was constructed. The five remaining forts are obsolete and today considered historic sites or parks which are open to the public. (continued on next page)

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History of the Park (continued)

Fort Constitution was used during the War of 1812 and was still serviceable during the Civil War when various units were trained there. Improvements in artillery during the 19th century made it clear that the old fort would have to be replaced. A new one was begun during the Civil War. It was to be a massive, three-tiered granite structure, but like others begun at the same time, was never completed. Armored steam powered warships with heavy guns made the masonry fort obsolete.

Outside the old fort in the area now occupied by the Coast Guard, a completely new system of fortifications was built between 1897 and 1903. This included a battery of two eight-inch guns on disappearing carriages, a mines casement, cable tank and a storage house for mines. The harbor was protected by mines during the Spanish American War and during World Wars I and II. Fort Constitution was returned to the State in 1961 and placed on the National Register of Historic Places on July 2, 1973.

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