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Zachary N. Russell

Salve Regina University, zachary.russell@salve.edu

Jeroen van den Hurk Ph.D.

Salve Regina University, jeroen.vandenhurk@salve.edu

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**Narragansett Bay Interdisciplinary Undergraduate Research
Summer Field Program**

**Rose Island's role as part of the Naval Torpedo Station at
Newport**

Zachary Russell ('23)

Supervisor:

Jeroen van den Hurk, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor of Cultural and Historic Preservation

Coordinator, Noreen Stonor Drexel Cultural and Historic Preservation Program

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Salve Regina University & Rose Island Lighthouse and Fort Hamilton Trust

Rose Island has a vast history spanning more than 300 years. It is located in the east passage in Narragansett Bay, with existing remnants of military fortifications, dating back to the American Revolution in the late eighteenth century and continuing up until WWII. The site includes one of the best intact First System Seacoast Fortifications commissioned by the US between 1794 and 1808, under the direction of French engineer Anne-Louis de Tousard. Tousard began the construction of a fort on Rose Island in 1799 that was going to be called Fort Hamilton, however, work ceased around 1801 and was never finished. Fort elements that were constructed included the bomb-proof barracks, the north and southwest circular bastions, north and southeast bastions and the south connecting curtain wall. It is suggested that work ceased on Tousard's Fort Hamilton due to easing tensions in Europe and the site was left abandoned. With growing tensions with Britain leading up to the Revolutionary War, the newly formed U.S. improved its fortifications and moved to the Second System Seacoast Fortifications by 1807¹. Most of the effort was then to build Fort Adams, as Fort Hamilton was looked upon as obsolete. From this time until 1869, the island was scarcely used until the Cholera epidemic in 1820 and then yellow fever around the 1850s. Rose Island was used as a quarantine site and part of the barracks building was used as a quarantine hospital. The next major form of construction on the island was in 1869, when a lighthouse was established on the southwest circular bastion of the abandoned fort. The lighthouse remained in use for 100 years until the Newport Bridge was built in 1969, which made the building obsolete. The building sat abandoned for a decade until preservation efforts were made in the mid-1980s by the Rose Island Lighthouse Foundation.

¹ "The Three* Systems of American Seacoast Defense," Starforts.com, 2016.
<http://www.starforts.com/americansystems.html>.

Today the lighthouse is restored to its circa late 1910s-1920s appearance and serves as a museum dedicated to lighthouse life.

As a large portion of Rose Island's eighteenth and mid-nineteenth century history has been documented, the continuation of documenting Rose Island's twentieth century history includes its role as part of the Naval Torpedo Station at Newport. After researching the Torpedo Station in Newport, it was discovered that Rose Island played a small but vital role in this large military installation. It was used for ammunition storage, but its role is just as important to document to produce as much of the island's history as possible.

Torpedo Station:

The Naval Torpedo Station at Newport began on Goat Island on July 29, 1869. As it expanded throughout the years, it consisted of Rose Island, Coasters Harbor Island, Coddington Cove, Gould Island, Prudence Island and Hope Island which were largely built up between the periods of WWI and WWII. Coddington Cove became the Central Torpedo Office, Goat Island became the chief manufacturing center, Gould Island became the center for testing and range proofing and Rose Island was used as a naval magazine for torpedo storage in 1883.

Goat Island was established on July 29, 1869, by the Army, and Commander E.O. Matthews, U.S. Navy, assumed command of the Naval Torpedo Station. The facility engaged in developing torpedoes and other forms of naval ordnance. The first mention of Rose Island as part of the Newport Torpedo Station was when a gun-cotton storage facility was activated in 1883, and the island was designated a U.S. Naval Magazine. The same year a Naval Training Station

on Coasters Harbor Island was established, and the Naval War College was opened in 1884.² During WWI, the Newport Torpedo Station employed around 3200 civilians when it developed and produced depth charges, mines, and torpedoes for the U.S. Naval Fleet. By 1918, the Navy established a storage facility for high explosives on Gould Island and several more buildings were built for torpedo and warhead storage and housing, along with the use of Hope Island by 1920.³

By the end of 1940, and the beginning of WWII, the station had swelled to 4802 workers, following the state of emergency declared by President Roosevelt on May 27, 1941. The station went through a period of rapid expansion. Additional torpedo storage facilities were leased on Third Street, Long Warf, and in Fall River, Massachusetts. A naval magazine established on Prudence Island in April 1942 and was placed under the control of the Torpedo Station on July 8, 1944. By August of that year, the station had become the largest single industrial-type employer in Rhode Island with more than 12,600 employees operating 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.⁴

The Newport Torpedo Station held a position of vital importance to the war effort, having produced approximately one third of the 57,653 torpedoes manufactured for the U.S. Navy between January 1, 1939, to June 1, 1946.⁵ Almost immediately after the war, the Navy ended torpedo manufacturing. In 1951, the Torpedo Station was reorganized as the Naval Underwater Ordnance Station (NUOS). In 1966, NUOS was incorporated into the Naval Underwater Weapons Station (NUWS), which became the Naval Underwater Systems Center (NUSC). (NUSC) then merged with the Underwater Sound Laboratory (USL) at New London Connecticut

² Walter K. Schroder, "Defenses of Narragansett Bay in World War II," (Rhode Island Publications Society, 1983), 77-78.

³ Schroder, "Defenses of Narragansett Bay in World War II," 78.

⁴ Schroder, "Defenses of Narragansett Bay in World War II," 79-80.

⁵ Schroder, "Defenses of Narragansett Bay in World War II," 81.

in 1970 and created what is now the Naval Undersea Warfare Center (NUWC).⁶ Goat Island was sold, and its buildings were demolished for redevelopment while the adjoining islands were left abandoned.⁷

Rose Island's Role as part of the Torpedo Station:

Rose Island played a small role within the large Torpedo Station and unfortunately, the documentation is scarce. Despite this, thorough research and piecing together evidence, shows the island had a vital role, as a storage facility for torpedoes.

The first mention of Rose Island as part of the Torpedo Station was that a gun-cotton storage facility was activated in 1883 and designated U.S. Naval Magazine on the island.⁸ The National Register nomination for Fort Hamilton briefly touches on its role, that it was used in the 1880s and 1890s for storage of munitions.⁹ From 1880 through WWII, the island was used as a storage dump for explosives and as a torpedo warhead arming facility.¹⁰ Charlotte Johnson, the first executive director of the Rose Island Lighthouse Foundation, documented this in her article "A New Perspective on Rose Island," in 1986. In 1883 the Navy approved a request of the Ordnance Bureau to use part of the island to excavate a pit for the storage of gun cotton, and by 1888 the island was used for the storage of explosives as well. Permission was granted in 1889 from the Secretary of War upon request of the Navy Department to use the island as a rifle range

⁶ Ryan Belmore, "On This Day in Newport History - June 9, 1869: Construction of First Torpedo Station on Goat Island Ordered." What's Up Newport, 9 June 2021, <https://whatsupnewp.com>.

⁷ Richard V. Simpson, "Goat Island, and the U.S. Naval Torpedo Station: Guncotton, Smokeless Powder, and Torpedoes. America Through Time," (an Imprint of Fronthill Media LLC, 2016).

⁸ Schroder, "Defenses of Narragansett Bay in World War II," 78.

⁹ Charlotte E. Johnson and Richard C. Youngken, "Fort Hamilton Historic District. National Register of Historic Places nomination file, October 22, 2001," (State Historic Preservation Office, Providence),17.

¹⁰ Johnson and Youngken, "Fort Hamilton Historic District. National Register of Historic Places nomination file, October 22, 2001," 17.

and for practice with rapid-firing and machine guns.¹¹ The book, “*Federal Owned Real Estate Under the Control of the Navy Department*,” published in 1937, also mentioned this, writing that on April 20, 1889, the Navy Department requested to use all of the island, except the portion used for the lighthouse to be used as a rifle range.¹² By 1904, 1.5 acres in the southwest portion of the island was separated and reserved for the 1869 lighthouse and the remainder of the island would still be owned by the War Department. In 1916, the northwestern circular bastion was dug out, the masonry was repaired and topped with five feet of reinforced cement to be fitted with a steel roof and used as a magazine for mines. Also, during this time the 9-room barracks building was used for storage of explosives, the stone and brick walls were repaired to accommodate window and door covering, with accommodated squared-off window frames and a few squared-off doorways toward the barrack’s east most section. A wooden hipped roof was also added with a lookout platform.¹³

During WWI, the island continued to be used as a storage dump for explosives, and a subsidiary of the Torpedo Station. With the rapid expansion of torpedo manufacturing at the onset of WWII, Rose Island’s facilities were not exempt. The island was used for the storage of high explosives, and heavier anti-aircraft guns were installed to deter any intrusion from the enemy had they entered Narragansett Bay, and temporary Quonset huts were built in the middle of the island to accommodate workers as torpedo production expanded.¹⁴

¹¹ Charlotte E. Johnson, “A New Perspective on Rose Island: The Evolution of its Fortifications and Defenses,” (Newport History 59, 1986), 19.

¹² Bureau of Yards and Docks, “Federal Owned Real Estate under the Control of the Navy Department,” (U.S. Govt. Prin. Off., 1937), 331.

¹³ Johnson, “A New Perspective on Rose Island: The Evolution of its Fortifications and Defenses,” 21.

¹⁴ Johnson, “A New Perspective on Rose Island: The Evolution of its Fortifications and Defenses,” 23.

Fortifications Relating to WWII

The individual fortifications and infrastructure relating to WWII proved the most difficult to accurately document, and the best references were examining aerial photos along with referencing a site map of Rose Island from the Historic American Engineering Record (HAER) (See Figure 1.). This map shows the various outbuildings with associated numbers that are consistent with the numbered list of buildings on the National Register nomination for Fort Hamilton. Aside from this, another useful source is newspaper clippings which occasionally mention outbuildings used for storage being erected on the island. An example of this is an article in the Providence Journal from 1914 titled “Navy to Build Storehouse,” which explains plans were being drawn for a 150 ft by 50 ft storehouse on Rose Island, with Civil Engineer Kirby Smith, U.S.N in charge of the public works department of the Narragansett Bay naval station.¹⁵ Knowing the dimensions of this building, examining aerial photos and the HAER map, this was most likely building 34. Another Providence Journal article titled “Quarters Will be Provided for a Gunner and Watchman at Rose Island” from April 12, 1902 mentions \$5,200 was appropriated to erect quarters for a gunner and watchman at Rose Island.¹⁶ After examining aerial photos and the HAER map, these were likely buildings 22 and 23. So far this is the only additional form of information relating to outbuildings on the island and although these newspaper articles are not specific, they are helpful resources to compare dates and set a base for researching these additional buildings.

This lack of documentation for individual buildings is likely because of the rapid expansion of the Torpedo Station in Newport between WWI and WWII. The buildings’ purpose

¹⁵ “Navy to Build Storehouse,” The Providence Journal, 1914.

¹⁶ “To Care for Gun Cotton: Quarters Will be Provided for a Gunner and Watchman at Rose Island.” The Providence Journal, April 12, 1902.

was to serve the needs of the time for the war effort and were therefore quickly erected. Another plausible reason could be that certain specific aspects of the Torpedo Station were classified, and the Navy did not want these known. Additional research could be conducted by collaborating with the Naval War College by searching for work authorizations that documented work done on Rose Island.

Additional Research Questions:

Does the Naval War College have any information of the buildup of fortifications during WWI and WWII?

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Figure 1:

