

new york

Castle Clinton

np

National Monument

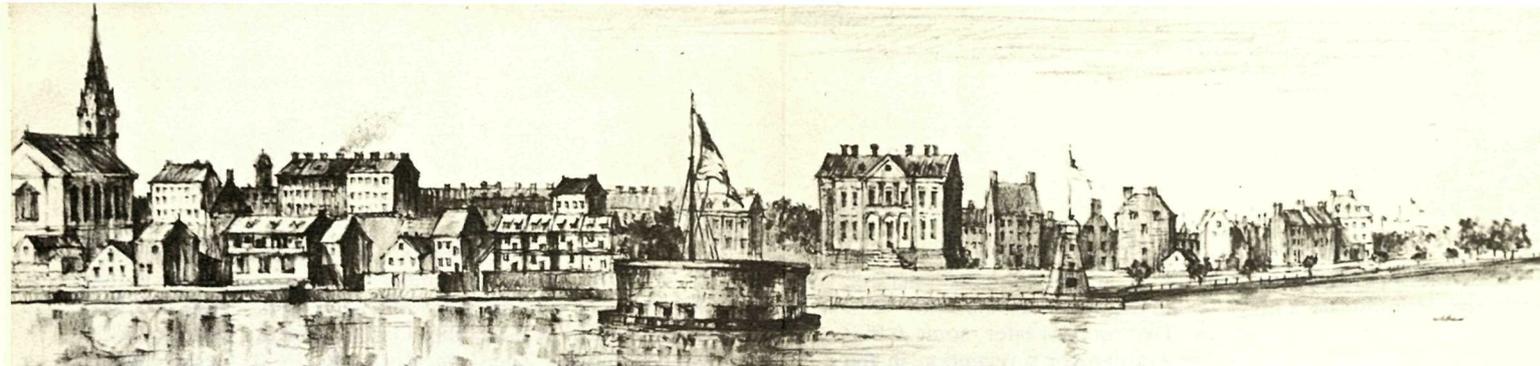
Castle Clinton National Monument is both a link with America's colonial past and a symbol of a century and a half of American growth and change. As the last of a series of forts which, from 1626, successively guarded the lower end of Manhattan Island, it was important in the early history of our greatest commercial city. As Castle Garden, theater, and immigrant depot, it symbolizes phases in the development of a Nation rising to greatness. Millions of Americans remember it as the fabulous New York City Aquarium.

EARLY BACKGROUND: Castle Clinton was born of the tensions of the Napoleonic era. Some 2 years after the renewal of the conflict between France and Great Britain in 1803, a sharp reversal of English policy caused the seizure of more American shipping and the impressment of more American seamen into the British Navy. For Great Britain, fighting slow strangulation of her commerce, desperate measures were necessary; the policy of mild toleration of neutral commerce, practiced prior to 1805, could no longer be afforded. The troubled months that followed were climaxed, on June 22, 1807, by the firing upon the American frigate *Chesapeake*.

Now, for the first time, the American people were united in a feeling of concern for the Nation. In New York, mass meetings denounced the outrageous attack. At the same time, a great "fortification fever" swept the city, for New York, except for Fort Columbus on Governor's Island, was virtually defenseless—a condition that had existed since the destruction in 1790 of Fort George, the old Dutch-English fort on the site of today's Custom House.

Four new fortifications resulted. One of these was three-tiered Castle Williams on Governors Island, still in use today. Opposite, some 200 feet off the southwest point of Manhattan Island, the West Battery was built. (In 1815, this battery would be named Castle Clinton in honor of DeWitt Clinton, a recent mayor of New York City and later governor of New York.) It was the lineal descendant of a waterside battery that had protected New York as early as 1689. The other forts were Fort Wood on Bedloe's Island and Fort Gibson on Ellis Island.

Generally circular in shape, the West Battery was designed for 28 guns in one tier of casemates. Its 8-foot-thick walls of red sandstone stood upon a massive foundation of rough stone originally designed to support a multi-tier "tower" fort similar to Castle Williams. That foundation had been built up within an encompassing polygon of stone blocks in about 35 feet of water. A timber causeway with drawbridge connected the new fort to the New York City Battery of that day. The sally port of the West Battery fronted upon the causeway at the center of the gorge, or



CASTLE CLINTON, 1812. FROM A DRAWING BY LILI RETHI

Courtesy New York Historical Society

CASTLE GARDEN, 1885. FROM A PAINTING BY ANDREW MELROSE



rear wall. Inside the rounded ends of the rear wall were the fort magazines. Quarters for the officers were at each side of the sally port passageway. There were no barracks for the enlisted men.

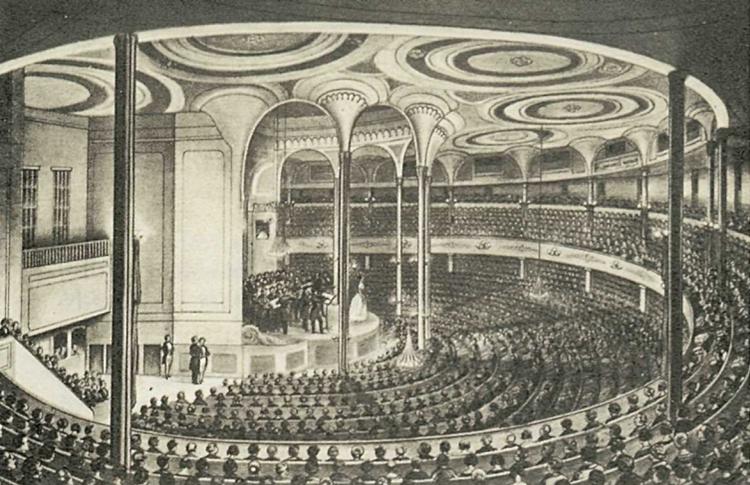
Completed in the autumn of 1811, the West Battery fired its 32-pounder cannon in salute for the first time on Evacuation Day, November 25, the 28th anniversary of the departure of the British from New York at the close of the American Revolution.

CASTLE CLINTON, 1812-23: During the War of 1812, the West Battery was an important part of the defenses of New York City. Those defenses were never tested, however; the West Battery's guns fired at nothing more dangerous than a harmless hulk moored in the river for target practice. Still the forts were always ready. Perhaps as a result, New York City did not share Washington's fiery fate. For part of the war period, the West Battery may have served as headquarters for the defenses of New York City and vicinity.

After the war ended, the West Battery was named Castle Clinton and became headquarters for the Third Military District (New York below the Highlands, and part of New Jersey); for a time, it was headquarters for another district as well. The first general to command from the fort was Alexander Macomb. In 1816 he was succeeded by Maj. Gen. Winfield Scott, who would command the entire U.S. Army when in 1861 the firing upon Fort Sumter ushered in civil war. In 1821, Scott, having decided that Castle Clinton had outlived its usefulness, moved the district headquarters to Governors Island. Two years later, Castle Clinton was ceded to the city of New York.

THE FORT BECOMES CASTLE GARDEN: In June 1824, Castle Clinton was leased by the city as a place of public entertainment. Opened as Castle Garden on July 3, it soon became one of the favored "places of resort" in New York.

The fort's interior became a "fanciful garden, tastefully ornamented with shrubs and flowers"; in time, a great fountain was installed. The fort was the setting for band concerts, fireworks extravaganzas, an occasional balloon ascension, and demonstrations of the latest "scientific marvels," among them the telegraph demonstrated by Morse in 1842. The gunrooms, decorated with marble busts and a panorama painted by "celebrated artists," became a promenade and, from boxes seating eight people, a place from which to watch the show. A more popular promenade was the top of the Castle wall, where awnings covered a 14-foot-wide walkway. The officers' quarters became a "saloon" selling choice liquors, confections, and ices.



THE JENNY LIND DEBUT AT CASTLE GARDEN, SEPTEMBER 11, 1850

Courtesy New-York Historical Society



INSIDE VIEW OF THE NEW YORK CITY AQUARIUM, 1920

CASTLE CLINTON TODAY



From the start, Castle Garden seemed marked for extraordinary events. Within a month after its opening, the Marquis de Lafayette landed there at the start of a triumphal tour of America. Two months later, some 6,000 of the citizenry crowded the Garden for a reception in the general's honor. Castle Garden, covered with a vast awning for the occasion, was magically transformed. It was "the most magnificent fete given under cover in the world," said the *New York Evening Post*. In the years that followed, many other prominent people were honored at the Garden: Andrew Jackson, in 1833; Vice-President Richard M. Johnson, hero of the Battle of the Thames, in 1840; President John Tyler, in 1843; President James K. Polk, in 1847; Henry Clay, in 1848; and the great Hungarian patriot Louis Kossuth, in 1851.

By 1845, Castle Garden was given a roof and had become something more than a scene of band concerts, fireworks, and promenades. The Garden, for the first time, presented opera (in concert form). The 1845 season opened with *Semiramide* and *The Barber of Seville*. Rossini's harmonies now had "scope for unfolding themselves . . . without breaking their necks against the walls," said the *Tribune*. But entertainment of a lighter sort continued to be offered on many occasions, and the Garden cellars continued to be filled "with the most delicious fluids so that the audience may be at once regaled with the choicest Italian music, and the most inspiring mint juleps."

Then, on September 11, 1850, Castle Garden witnessed the musical event of the century when P. T. Barnum presented the "Swedish Nightingale," Jenny Lind, in her American debut. More than 6,000 people paid at least \$3 a seat to see and hear her. At the close of her performance, the audience broke into a "tempest of cheers."

IMMIGRANT LANDING DEPOT: On August 3, 1855, Castle Garden, under lease to the State of New York, was opened as an immigrant landing depot. Made a part of the mainland only a short time before, the Garden was now enclosed on its landward side with about 1,000 feet of board fence.

It was the floodtide of the great midcentury migration from Europe, the Irish and the Germans in the van. Regulation by the U.S. Government was virtually nonexistent. Within Castle Garden, for the first time, bewildered immigrants were comparatively protected from the rapacious "runners," cheats, and sharpers who roamed the open wharves at will to take advantage of gullible newcomers. Here, generally reliable information could be obtained as to boardinghouses, travel routes, and fares; needed medical attention was provided; and better opportunity for fair exchange of currency was to be found, as well as the chance to get a job. Between 1855 and 1889, more than 8 million immigrants—two out of every three persons immigrating to

the United States in this period—passed through the Garden.

After 1882, the number of immigrants from eastern and southern Europe gradually increased. More buildings were erected outside the Garden; brick walls replaced wooden fences. Then, on April 18, 1890, Castle Garden received its last immigrants. With control shifted to the U.S. Superintendent of Immigration, the Barge Office became a temporary landing depot, pending the opening of the newer, more commodious center on Ellis Island on January 1, 1892.

NEW YORK CITY AQUARIUM: Castle Garden, once again altered, now became the New York City Aquarium. Some 30,000 people visited the aquarium on opening day, December 10, 1896. In the years that followed there were millions of visitors until, in 1941, the aquarium was closed; presumably, the building was to be torn down to make way for the Brooklyn-Battery Tunnel approaches. But because of the efforts of determined New Yorkers, the historic structure was not destroyed, and, on August 12, 1946, Congress authorized the establishment of Castle Clinton as a national monument.

CASTLE CLINTON TODAY: After extensive restoration, Castle Clinton is once again open to the public. Its appearance is that of an early 19th-century fort, but through exhibits, the visitor will learn of its days as a theater and as a landing depot through which more than 8 million immigrants passed. Concerts, recitals, ethnic folk festivals, and other cultural events will again make Castle Clinton a part of our living heritage.

ADMINISTRATION: Castle Clinton National Monument is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. A superintendent, whose address is 26 Wall Street, New York, NY 10005, is in charge.

As the Nation's principal conservation agency, the Department of the Interior has responsibility for most of our nationally owned public lands and natural resources. This includes fostering the wisest use of our land and water resources, protecting our fish and wildlife, preserving the environmental and cultural values of our national parks and historical places, and providing for the enjoyment of life through outdoor recreation. The Department assesses our energy and mineral resources and works to assure that their development is in the best interests of all our people. The Department also has a major responsibility for American Indian reservation communities and for people who live in Island Territories under U.S. administration.

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