

[From Summer 2002]

## **The Land of Many Uses**

Located at the southernmost point of the Delmarva Peninsula is Fisherman Island, which has a rich history. Once a quarantine station for the Public Health Service, this 1.5 mile-long island was used by the United States Army during World War I.

In May, 1917, two 5-inch guns from Fort Dupont and Fort Slocum (located near Washington D.C.) were removed and transported to Fisherman Island. While this activity was occurring, the Army was trying to acquire land at the southern end of the Eastern Shore of Virginia. In September 1940 the property of Henry Alexander Wise was obtained by the Army and named Fort Winslow. At the same time, a plan was approved for the construction of two 16-inch batteries, and in the summer of 1941 firing spurs for four 8-inch railway guns were installed.

On February 6, 1942, the station was renamed Fort Custis as a result of pressure from local residents. The reason for the conflict was that the Custis family had a long association with the Eastern Shore. In the same month, a pair of 3-inch guns was placed on Fisherman Island to provide torpedo boat defense. On September 25, 1942, the fort underwent another name change to Fort John Custis in order to avoid confusion with Fort Eustis. In October 1942, construction began on Battery Winslow, a pair of 16-inch case-mated guns that could fire 2000 pound projectiles over 45,000 yards. Work continued on this project, but one 6-inch battery was eliminated due to the higher priority Field Artillery Program. Battery Winslow was completed and its 16-inch guns tested in 1945.

Eventually, activity on Fort John Custis declined and in July 1946 the fort was put in caretaker status. In addition, elements on Fisherman Island and Battery Winslow were dismantled by the U.S. government in 1949. Fort John Custis was then taken over by the U.S. Air Force as Cape Charles Air Force Station.

At the same time, Fisherman Island was transferred to the Navy for harbor defense and, in 1969, was established as Fisherman Island National Wildlife Refuge. In 1973, the title of the island was assigned to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and it was managed by Back Bay National Wildlife Refuge. In 1984, the Eastern Shore of Virginia National Wildlife Refuge was established and, as a result, managed land from the Air Force Station and Fisherman Island. Despite the long term military presence on the refuge, today it is home to a wide variety of birds and other animals.

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