



Silent sentries of the Seacoast

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When you drive along Scenic Route 1A up the New Hampshire's beautiful Seacoast you may spy them. Gaunt concrete towers standing tall near the coastline, watching for an invasion which never came, awaiting attackers who never arrived.

As the world plunged into war in 1939 dawned, steps were taken to provide for the defense of America's shores. Many of the fortifications guarding cities and installations dated from the 1920's or much earlier, and as the Nazi regime swept across Europe it was plain to see that these rusting relics could not hope to stop a modern invading army and air force.

Portsmouth, with its naval shipyard became one of those points which was deemed vital to the war effort, and required improvements upon its defenses to fend off a possible naval attack by the Axis fleet. Fort Dearborn at Odiorne Point in Rye, now home of the Seacoast Science Center, became the new center of the Seacoast's defense. A pair of mighty 16 inch guns were planned for the new fort to compliment the smaller batteries located at Fort Constitution and Fort Stark in Newcastle and Fort Foster across the river in Kittery. To aim those guns, observation towers were needed.

Tall towers in particular were constructed due to the longer ranges of the new guns. As you observe a tower, you will see at least one slot-like window at the top which was used by the men to chart the distance, heading, direction and speed of an enemy vessel. The more 'slots' a tower had, the more guns were under it's control. At least two towers were needed to triangulate the location of the target, and had the guns



WAITING & WATCHING — The tall concrete tower on Great Boar's Head at Hampton Beach (pictured above) is just one of a network of watchtowers that dotted the Seacoast during World War II.

— Beach News Photo

ever been fired in anger, they would have observed the splashes, and instructed the guns how to correct their aim to hit the target.

While the towers would have primarily served the local forts, they also tied into a larger network of coastal defense. They served as the southernmost tip of the range of Portland Maine's defenses, and the northernmost tip of Boston's defenses. Defenses which were fortunately never used.

Fort Dearborn's own 16 inch guns were test fired for the first and only time on June 23, 1944, as the tide of war had swung in favor of the Allies. The towers remained watching the waves though for possible U-Boat activity until the end of the war.

With the end of the war, and the appearance of the atomic bomb, coastal defenses had suddenly

become obsolete, and so too had the towers. Some which had been erected on private land were torn down as soon as the war was over. A few were incorporated into unique houses, such as one you will see on Route 1A in Rye between Bass and Jenness Beach. One can be seen on Great Boar's Head at Hampton Beach, poking up among the summer houses. Some of the tallest, one of which is the dominant feature on the Isles of Shoales island of Appledore, were taken over by the US Navy for a time to study radar signatures of the newest submarines as they cruised on the surface in and out of Portsmouth. Most were constructed as squares, but one of the tallest at Pulpit Rock in Rye (between Wallis Sands and Odiorne Point) is cylindrical and can be seen poking up out of the trees. For the most part, the towers

were sealed up, and forgotten where they stand today as silent sentries on the Seacoast.

Individual observation points along the Seacoast include two towers on Garrish Island in Kittery; a tower on Appledore Island at the Isles of Shoals; two towers in Rye, one at Pulpit Rock and another which has been made into part of a private home near Bass Beach; and a tower on private property on Great Boar's Head at Hampton Beach. None of these towers are open to the public. To get a feel for what they must have been like on the observation level, the three inch batteries at Fort Foster in Kittery and Fort Stark in Newcastle have observation points built into the battery. A small one-story observation post is also accessible at Fort Constitution, perched on the southeastern corner of the 1808 brick wall. Other local observation points included Fort McClary, which had no tower, and Salisbury Beach, whose short observation post was demolished a few years after World War Two.

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Fun Fact #38
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