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Frank Sleeper

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Gun Batteries At Peaks Traced To World War II

By Frank Sleeper
Staff Writer

The Yawata Outing Club, a 40-member neighborhood group from York, Tyng and Tote St., has uncovered the history of two gun emplacements on Peaks Island.

These emplacements, Batteries Steele and Cravens, are now important to the whole area. Battery Steele is the site of the proposed Peaks Island Conference Center. Battery Cravens is owned by the Casco Bay Island Development Association.

The group worked through Edwin Randall, one of U.S. Rep. David Ryder's aides. In turn, Randall contacted Charles E. Walker, from the historical division of the Office of the Chief of Engineers, Baltimore, Md.

A four-page summary of the history of the two batteries resulted. That summary has gone to Peter McLaughlin, vice-president of Casco Bay Lines, the Maine Historical Society, in A. Edward Langlois, a director of the Department of Transportation's bureau of warways who placed it above a meeting of the proposed Peaks Island Center.

In October, 1940, a board of officers, headed by Maj. Gen. Thomas A. Terry, commanding general, New England sector of the Coast Artillery Corps, met for preliminary selection of the proposed Peaks Island sites.

The 16-inch batteries had to be a minimum of 100 feet from public highways, inhabited buildings and railway rights-of-way.

This board first recommended that the 16-inch gun battery be placed on Peaks Island with a 6-inch battery at Fort Preble as a harbor defense plan with either 16 or 6-inch guns.

The two kinds of standardized armament were designated for 39 coastal sites in the U.S., Hawaii and the Caribbean. Portland was among the selected sites.

In October, 1961, a board of engineers, headed by Maj. Gen. Thomas A. Terry, commanding general, New England sector of the Coast Artillery Corps, met to select preliminary sites.

In a letter to Mrs. Beatrice Murray Chapman, president of Peaks Island Conference Center Inc., McDonough tells how the research was done.

Just before World War II the War Department planned new coastal defenses because of the threat of attack from long-range and carrier-based aircraft.

A prototype was built in San Francisco harbor between 1937 and 1940, a reinforced concrete battery housing a pair of 16-inch Navy guns.

In 1940, as the international situation worsened, the War Department prepared a master
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McKinley. But it soon decided to move the smaller battery to Peaks Island also because that allowed greatly increased range of fire.

The two batteries were to cover 175 acres which the government bought for an estimated $50,000. By September, 1911, construction was underway. In Aug., 1917, both batteries were named in honor of distinguished officers of the Coast Artillery corps.

Battery 102, the large one, was named for Harry Lee Steele, who enlisted in Arkansas to become a major general in the corps.

Battery 203, the smaller one, was named for Richard Craven, an Arkansas native, who was a pilot in the corps and saw duty in the Portland area before World War I.

Work on the two batteries continued until 1914. The 1914 list of 24 Portland harbor batteries included the two on Peaks Island and reached a maximum range of 44,400 yards.

End of World War II, its two guns were never fired in hostility and were scrapped in the late 1940s.