



*New York Harbor of the early 1800s from Governors Island*

Washington viewed the completed project with deep satisfaction and wrote to Lee: "Governor's Island is more strong and better guarded than any other post in the Army."

As imminent events would prove, it was extremely fortunate that this was so. Since early summer, rumors stirred that Howe was soon to quit Halifax for New York, bringing a vast armada with him. On July 2, the advance contingent of the English fleet appeared off Sandy Hook. Fifty ships from Halifax came into New York Harbor that day, and more than a hundred the next. Then followed Admiral Howe (Sir William's brother), with a battle squadron and fresh troops from England, and the entire British fleet and Lord Cornwallis' army that had just been defeated in an attempt to take Charleston. More than 400 ships, totaling 1,200 guns, were swinging at anchor in the Lower Bay, while the 32,000 British Grenadiers, Scottish Highlanders, and Hessian mercenaries they had brought, went to camp on Staten Island.

The first active participation of Governors Island in the War of the Revolution occurred on July 12, three days after the newly enacted Declaration of Independence had been read to the troops. At 3 p.m. five ships separated themselves from the forest of masts that crowded the harbor. With a fair wind they set their course up the Hudson, with the obvious intention of testing the American defenses. They were the 44-gun frigate Phoenix, the 30-gun frigate Rose, the schooner Tryal

and two tenders. As soon as they came within range of the island's guns, they received an exceedingly warm reception. For more than an hour there was a brisk interchange of shots, in which the shore batteries of New York and Brooklyn joined. Although the English ships eventually made their escape to the vicinity of Haverstraw, it was noted that the Rose suffered heavy damage. The colonial cannon expended 196 pounds in this engagement, and there were no reported casualties.

But this was merely a rehearsal for the important role Governors Island would play when the entire might of Great Britain's invasion force was thrown against New York on August 26. Howe correctly surmised from the results of the trial run of the Phoenix and her escorts that it would be impractical to risk his ships to the island's fire by making a direct frontal attack on the city. Instead, Howe brought his troops across the harbor from Staten Island to Gravesend Bay on Long Island, just beyond the reach of the Governors Island batteries. From there, he launched his advance to flank Washington's defense line on Brooklyn Heights. With an overwhelming victory almost within their grasp, the British were powerless to halt the American reinforcements from New York, who, under the protection of the Governors Island guns, crossed the East River unhampered and temporarily stemmed the Redcoat attack. Had it been possible to bring up any of Britain's great naval power to blockade the New York and Brooklyn