



The South Battery, built in 1812

Chapter 5

Our second war with England began on June 18, 1812, and on Aug. 14, Governors Island fittingly marked the event by holding a rousing target practice for the benefit of the artillery militiamen who had supplemented the regular garrison.

Target practice in those days was not only a training exercise, but a social event for civilian enjoyment that ranked second only to a full dress parade. Specially invited guests, attired as for an afternoon tea, were permitted vantage points close by the various emplacements. From here they could watch the troops at work, admire their gleaming regimentals, and – after some shrieks of well-bred dismay from the feminine portion of the audience, when the guns were fired – applaud the marksmanship of the gunners. The less-fortunate spectators, had to be content with a long-range, but quieter view of the proceedings. On this occasion, with the new war the chief topic of conversation in New York, it is safe to assume that its citizens crowded

the seawall at the Battery as well as the grassy slopes of Governors Island. The crowd watched Castle Williams and Castle Clinton go into action against an old hulk anchored in the Hudson about 1,000 yards equidistant from each.

The two forts blazed away for two hours, by the end of which time, a total of 384 shots had been fired; 317 had hit the target. In addition, the hulk further had been set on fire by the experimental use of red hot cannon balls, heated in a portable forge belonging to one of the regiments.

Almost immediately after this target practice, New York was thrown into a turmoil of dismay by a rumor that the troops stationed on Governors Island had been ordered to duty along the Canadian border. So great and widespread was the alarm over the fact that the city might be left defenseless that a newspaper of the day observed, "There had been no marriage in the city during the past week, the citizens probably too busy digging fortifications." No longer could the authorities ignore it and they were obliged to allay the public distress by issuing, through the papers, an official denial that any part