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A Military Past, an Unknown Future



Mark Lehmann/Associated Press

THE Smothers Brothers were born there. It's where Joe Louis took his Army physical. [David Rockefeller](#) once painted its restrooms. "It" is Governors Island, a 172-acre site, rich in history, that sits off the southern tip of Manhattan.

"Governors Island: The Jewel of New York Harbor" ([Syracuse University Press](#), \$60), by Ann L. Bittenwieser, an accomplished urban historian, is a vivid reminder of the city's military past, and, above all, of the vast potential for this underappreciated and underutilized oasis.

"For 242 years," Ms. Bittenwieser writes, "from the arrival of a British regiment in 1755 to the disestablishment ceremonies of the Coast Guard base there in 1997, the lifeblood of Governors Island has been the military." Its military demands were responsible for, among other things, the nation's biggest regimental dormitory and what was billed as the world's shortest railroad.

While the text delves deeper into local arcana than an average reader might want to go, the book is richly adorned with evocative drawings, maps and photographs that trace the island's life, from the Dutch landing in 1624 to its military incarnations as a fort and a prison, to its role as a site of presidential summit meetings and Coast Guard rescue base and, finally, to its transfer from the federal government to the [National Park Service](#) and New York City and State.

"The recreational legacy has finally arrived," Ms. Bittenwieser proclaims, alluding to the island's new and growing role as a park. But the fulfillment of that plan remains subject to the imagination and commitment of officials.

Ms. Bittenwieser's book is a great guide, but too heavy for most hikers to carry. Fortunately, just in time for fall, several other informative Baedekers to the city have been published.