

FORT COLUMBIA

Pacific County, [Washington](#)

by

[Gary B. Speck](#)



At THE mOuTH OF THE COLUMBIA RIVER,

American interests were protected by three well-armed forts bristling with massive artillery emplacements. These forts were built in a triangle to protect the strategic river mouth from any foreign interlopers. [FORT STEVENS](#) was established on the south bank of the Columbia's mouth. While across the river on the southwestern point of Washington, forts **CANBY** and **COLUMBIA** added their firepower.

FORT COLUMBIA is located at Chinook Point, about ten miles east of Cape Disappointment (lighthouse) and the town of Ilwaco, and about 2.5 miles west of the north end of the Astoria Bridge, northwest of Astoria, [Oregon](#). It is one of the most intact coastal protection forts in the country, with four [batteries](#) and over a dozen restored/preserved wooden buildings on site.

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This site was chosen due to its then unobstructed view across the mouth of the river.

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YESTERDAY

Construction began on the fort in 1896, 21 years after **FORT CANBY** (1875) and 33 years after **FORT STEVENS** (1863). It took eight years to complete, and remained active until 1947, when it was deactivated. It was one of many "Endicott Era" forts to be built in the country. For additional details on that era, see our [FORT STEVENS](#) page.

FORT COLUMBIA was a self-sufficient little community and was fully garrisoned from the Spanish-American War, through the Second World War. Located in a sparsely populated corner of Washington, **FORT COLUMBIA** was more populous than most of the smaller local towns. Even though the military was



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here to protect American interests and keep a watchful eye on the river mouth, the soldiers still enjoyed life. They interacted with the local townsfolk with their band and a baseball team that played against some of the local town teams. The fort also hosted dances to which local single women were invited. Some of the onpost amenities included dairy cows, a firehouse, hospital, jail, power generator plant and a theater. The Army brought in food and provisions from a landing and dock located at the tip of Chinook Point, below the fort.

On May 12, 1950, ownership of the deactivated fort was transferred to the State of Washington, which in turn restored the buildings and turned it into a state park.

TODAY



In the summer of 2014, **Ghost Town USA** visited this wonderful old fort. We arrived in the evening after the buildings were all closed and locked, and as a result, pretty much had the whole fort to ourselves. As we wandered through the various batteries and peeked through the windows of the public buildings, we could feel the moldering sense of the past with the aura of a rich history hanging in the cool, brisk breeze.

The fort is NOT visible from US 101 as it sits on top of the point, while the highway runs through a tunnel directly below the complex. Access is gained from the west side of the tunnel off the south side of the highway. The entrance IS highly visible coming from the west just before entering the tunnel, but from the east - that's another story! The turnoff is very easy to miss (EXPERIENCE!!!) IF you are coming from the east, just as you exit the tunnel a small brown sign indicates the entrance on the river side of the highway a couple hundred FEET west of the tunnel

portal. Turn left across the eastbound lanes where indicated. Use extreme caution, as there is NO left turn pocket or lane.

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Fort Columbia, Pacific County, Washington

Barracks Building



Administration Building



CENTRAL POST

The **CENTRAL POST** perches at the top of the cleared area in the heart of the park. A few scattered buildings lie around the outskirts, but we did not visit them. Instead we focused our attention to the three rows of buildings marching up and down the hillside facing out over the gun batteries. The southernmost line includes four buildings that were used for: Enlisted Men's Barracks, Administration Building, Commissioned Officer's Quarters and the Commanding Officer's Quarters. The center street, to the north was lined with the Quartermaster's Storehouse, NCO Quarters and the Hospital. The northernmost street had a pair of buildings: NCO Quarters and the Post Steward's Quarters. Nearby to the west was the firehouse, and to the east, the powerhouse. A guardhouse was located below, between two segments of Battery Ord. Other structures included: a mines protection casemate (built in 1937), a searchlight, powerhouse, ordnance storehouse, observation station, command center and a dormitory. Pilings from the wharf also remain.

Officers' Quarters



Commanding Officer's Quarters



In addition to the central post, four major artillery emplacements/gun batteries remain.

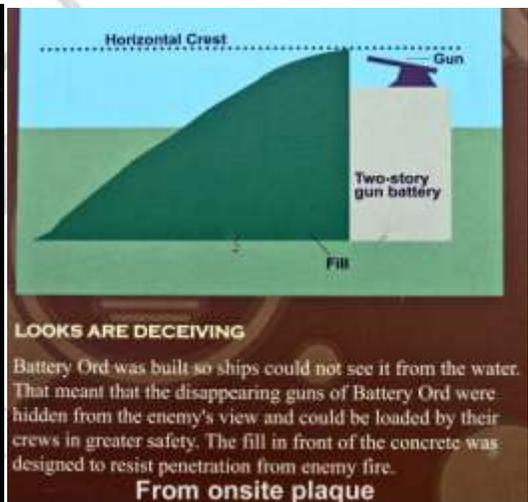
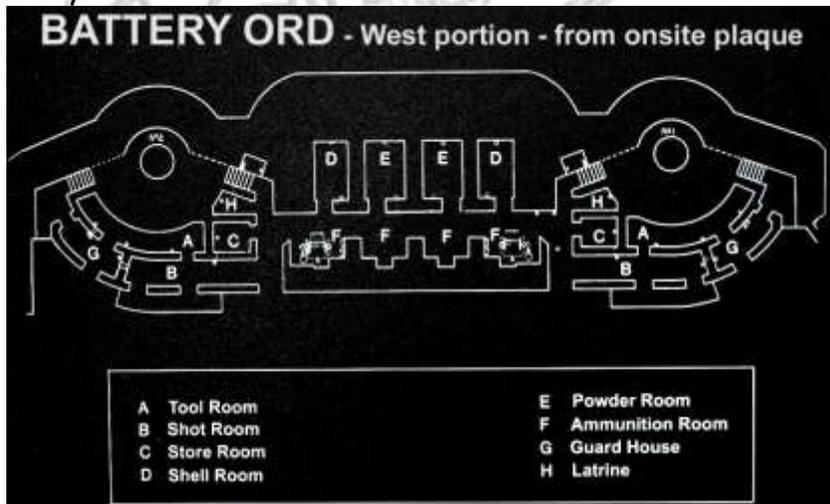
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BATTERY JULES ORD



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This is the oldest and highest battery and was built in two parts between December 1896 and July 1898. When it was built, the western, segment was armed with a pair of 8" bore, disappearing rifled cannons ([Model M1888MI](#)), while the eastern portion - which was originally named **BATTERY NEARY** - had a single 8" rifled cannon (Model M1888MII.) Both models of gun had a range of about 11,000 yards (6.25 miles.) In 1910, the underground portion of the battery was converted to a switchboard room.



The battery remained active until August 1917 when the guns were removed and shipped to France for Allied use in WWI. Unfortunately the eastern portion had structural problems and was demolished and backfilled with soil, probably sometime after 1917. The western half still stands solid.

What was the wooden guardhouse - and is now the park's public restroom - sits atop the area between the two portions of the battery.

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Battery Ord

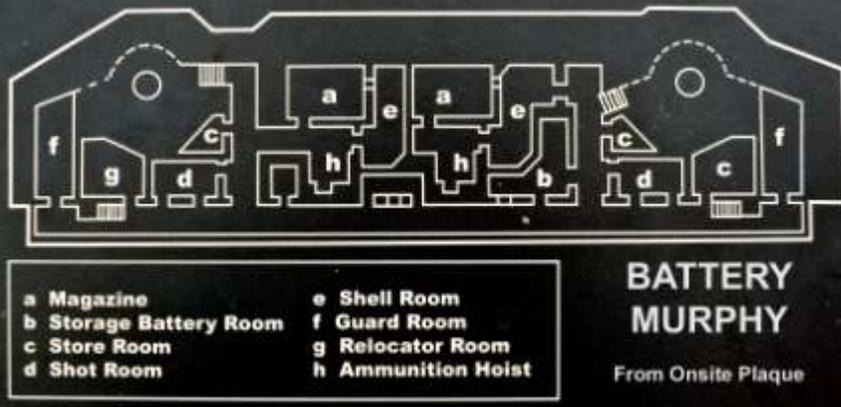


GUARDHOUSE

THE GUARD MAINTAINED ORDER, PREVENTED UNAUTHORIZED PERSONS FROM ENTERING OR LEAVING THE FORT, AND KEPT A CLOSE WATCH OVER PRISONERS. PHOTO from onsite plaque

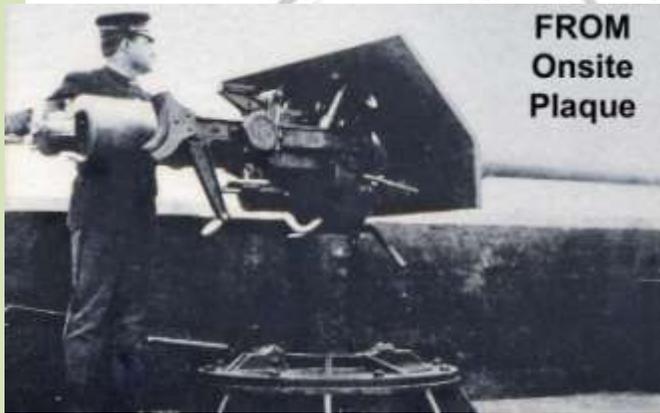
BATTERY MURPHY

Construction of this battery began in April 1899 and was completed 14 months later in June 1900. It was armed with a pair of Model M1897MI, 6" rifled disappearing guns, which had a maximum range of 14,509 yards (8.24 miles.) This was the battery most used for gunnery practice, the guns firing thousands of practice rounds at an average distance of 12,200 yards (just shy of seven miles.) The firing crew trained so well, they were able to fire each gun at almost three rounds per minute. This battery remained active until August 24, 1945.

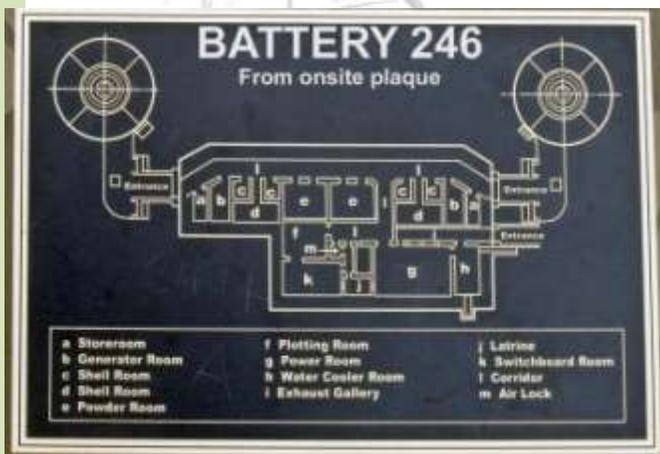
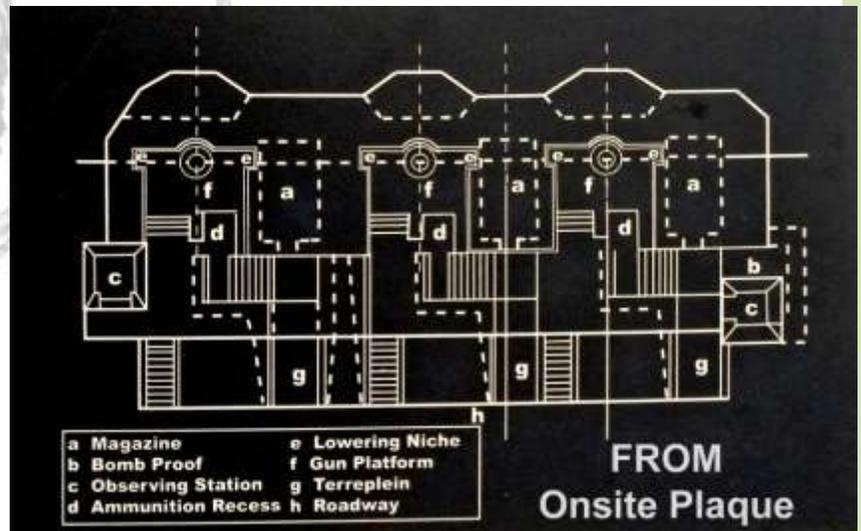


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BATTERY CRENSHAW



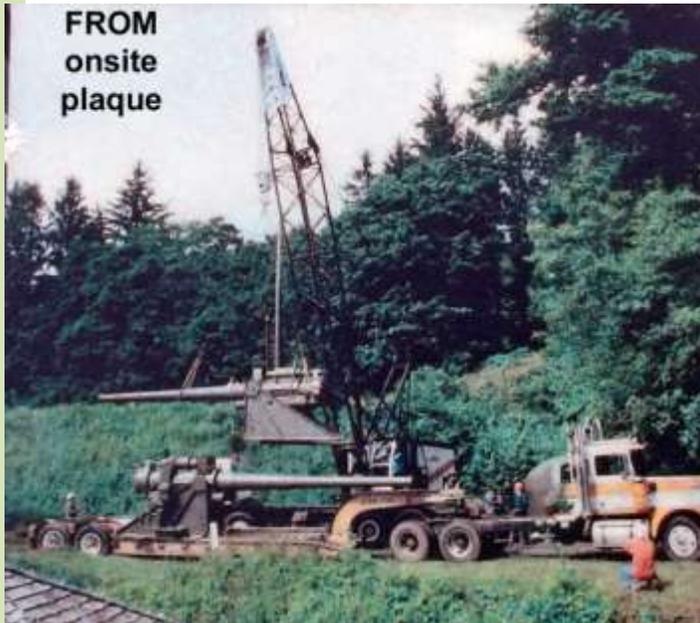
BATTERY CRENSHAW was built at the same time as **BATTERY MURPHY**, and armed with three Model M1898MI, 3" rifled "masking parapet" guns. Rather than using long-distance artillery pieces, these guns were teamed with those at **BATTERY SMURR**, across the river at **FORT STEVENS**, Oregon, to protect the WWI era minefields that were strung across the width of the river between the two forts. By 1920, that battery was deactivated during the post-war disarmament period.



BATTERY 246

The last of the four batteries built at the fort was **BATTERY 246**. This was part of a trio of batteries constructed at the mouth of the Columbia during the WWII period - along with **BATTERY 245** at **FORT STEVENS** and **BATTERY 247** at **FORT CANBY**.

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Construction of this emplacement began in 1942, but due to the end of WWII, it had not been completed, and the fort was deactivated shortly thereafter. The battery was originally

scheduled to receive a pair of Model T2-M1, 6" "shielded barbette" guns, a rapid fire, rifled gun that could fire as many as five 100+ pound rounds per minute, a maximum range of over 15 miles.



As the guns were never installed, the state went shopping. The Washington State Park folks found a pair of them at a US Navy base at [Argentina](#) in Newfoundland & Labrador, Canada. That base closed in 1999. After negotiations, a pair of 6" guns matching the original order were obtained and installed in 1993, nearly a half century after construction ended. It is said that these are two of the remaining six guns of this type remaining in the world.

At the time of our visit, the massive doors to the underside of the battery were closed and locked. I don't know if it is open to the public or not, and since we were alone, there was no one to ask. According to one website, the Powder Room is open and has interpretive display.

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At **FORT COLUMBIA**, American history is well preserved. The lines of restored buildings, still-solid batteries, pair of 6" cannons and the underground maze of dank, dark interior passageways and rooms of the batteries all exude the aroma of damp concrete, rust and history - lots of history.

PLEASE NOTE: The Washington State Park system requires a "*Discover Pass*," to be obtained. They can be issued for a single day use or annually, and can be obtained online or at various parks in the state. For more information contact the Washington State Parks folks at: <http://www.discoverpass.wa.gov/>

As always, when you visit, please abide by any [posted signage](#), respect the rights of the property owners and always abide by the [Ghost Towner's Code of Ethics](#).

This was our **Ghost Town of the Month** for June 2015.



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LOCATION

SITE NAME	ELEV.	LATITUDE	LONGITUDE	TOWNSHIP/RANGE
Astoria (Clatsop Co., OR) (NO GHOST!)	20'	46.1893690 46° 11' 22" N	-123.8352045 123° 50' 07" W	Secs 7-9, 17, 18, T8N, R9W, WM (Willamette Meridian & Base Line)
Cape Disappointment Lighthouse (Pacific Co., WA)	167'	46.2756559 46° 16' 32" N	-124.0518199 124° 03' 07" W	Ctr Sec 9, T9N, R11W, WM
Fort Canby (Pacific Co., WA)	16'	46.2834336 46° 17' 00" N	-124.0540425 124° 03' 15" W	NW¼ Sec 9, T9N, R11W, WM
Fort Columbia (Pacific Co., WA)	100' +/-	46.2522222 46° 15' 08" N	-123.9205556 123° 55' 14" W	NE¼ Sec 21, T9N, R10W, WM
Fort Stevens (Clatsop Co., OR)	23'	46.2020477 46° 12' 07" N	-123.9623694 123° 57' 45" W	E½ Sec 6, T8N, R10W, WM

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