



*New York State Archives*

**New York State Commission on Acquisition of Land for  
Public Defense at Rockaway Administrative Files B0237**

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## Overview of the Records

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<b>Repository:</b>	New York State Archives
<b>Summary:</b>	This series consists of documents relating to the acquisition of land deemed necessary by the federal government for establishment of defensive works at Rockaway Beach, Queens County, New York during World War I. Included are correspondence, minutes of meetings, exhibit materials, a few photographs, and copies of maps, plans, and legislation documenting work of the commission in acquiring and making improvements to the land for purposes of public defense.
<b>Creator:</b>	New York (State). Commission on Acquisition of Land for Public Defense at Rockaway
<b>Title:</b>	Commission on Acquisition of Land for Public Defense at Rockaway administrative files
<b>Quantity:</b>	1 cubic foot
<b>Inclusive Date:</b>	1917-1918
<b>Series:</b>	B0237

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## Arrangement

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Arranged by type of material or subject. Correspondence is roughly chronological.

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## Administrative History

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Chapter 13 of the Laws of 1917 amended Chapter 59 of the Laws of 1909 in relation to the acquisition of land by the state for purposes of public defense. The 1917 law was intended to acquire land deemed necessary by the federal government for establishment of defensive works at Rockaway Beach. The land was essential to construct a fortification for heavy guns to defend New York City against foreign attack. The idea was to put in place guns of sufficient caliber and range to protect New York City from sea bombardment and to protect the southern

entrance to New York Harbor. The law provided for the condemnation of all lands within the proposed government preservation and the transfer of title to the U.S. government.

The project involved a land purchase from the Rockaway Pacific Corporation (a subsidiary of the Southern Pacific Railroad Company), as well as the City of New York's ceding of certain land and lands under water in Jamaica Bay, Queens. Conflict arose in the legislature over alleged attempts to inflate the purchase price, concerns by legislators, including Senator Robert Wagner, that valuable waterfront land was being "given away" for nongovernmental purposes or to enrich friends of New York City Mayor John Purroy Mitchell, and countercharges by city officials of legislative stonewalling on urgent matters of public defense. A highway to the site was also planned and constructed, including a timber bulkhead to protect it from erosion.

Chapter 12 of the Laws of 1917 authorized the City of New York to cede or grant to the U.S. government lands or lands under water adjacent to the upland required. This responsibility was assumed by R.A.C. Smith, New York City Commissioner of Docks. The Commission on Acquisition of Land for Public Defense at Rockaway, which was created under Chapter 13 of the Laws of 1917, was made up of the Superintendent of Public Works (W.W. Wotherspoon), the Adjutant General (Louis W. Stotesbury and later Charles H. Sherrill), and the State Engineer and Surveyor (Frank M. Williams). It was in charge of acquiring title to the land and the structures and waters thereon "in the name and for the benefit of the people of the state." It was to undertake a survey and map of the required lands to which the State Engineer would affix a certificate of accuracy; the entire commission would certify the lands described were necessary for the purposes of public defense. Originals were submitted to the governor and after his approval filed with the Secretary of State and with the county clerk in which the lands were situated. The state retained concurrent jurisdiction with the U.S. government on the property, and such property conveyed and released to the U.S. was exempt from state taxes.

Chapter 130 of the Laws of 1917 added public highways to the scope of land defined as defense related. Surveys were to include descriptions of strips of lands for easements and rights of way, and provision was made for the maintenance and repair of such highways by the state. Moneys connected with the acquisition of land were to be paid by the state treasurer upon the warrant of the state comptroller. Chapter 654 of the Laws of 1917 also applied to the acquisition of title by the U.S. of lands within New York State for the purpose of maneuver grounds, fortifications, and other purposes at any time during the existence of a state of war.

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## Scope and Content Note

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The series consists of correspondence, minutes of meetings, exhibit materials, a few photographs, and copies of maps, plans, and legislation documenting work of the commission in acquiring and making improvements to land at Rockaway, Queens County, for defensive purposes during World War I.

The records include: correspondence; about a dozen maps, blueprints, and site plans showing boundaries and/or conditions of the property, proposed highway, etc.; minutes of committee meetings (February 26, 1917 to December 4, 1918) prepared by the commission's acting secretary, R.G. Finch; copies of pertinent legislative bills; copies of specifications on constructing the timber bulkhead protecting the highway adjacent to the site; statement and testimony of Mayor John Purroy Mitchel before the legislature on charges of contempt; and statement of facts on ceding lands or lands under water in Jamaica Bay by R.A.C. Smith.

The correspondence includes incoming and outgoing letters among federal, state, and local (New York City) officials. Major correspondents include members of the commission, Attorney General Merton E. Lewis, Comptroller Eugene M. Travis, various U.S. attorneys, officials of the Secretary of State and Queens County Clerk offices, and their various clerks and deputies.

Correspondence also pertains to: required certifications and notices by the commission; details about contracts with dredging companies or realtors volunteering appraisal services; plans and specifications about highway (and timber bulkhead) construction and letters about advertisements, bids, inspections, and payments for same; and scheduling meetings of the commission and transmitting its directions/decisions.

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## Related Information

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### Related Material

B0240Series B0240, Card Index to the Commission's Administrative Files, indexes this series.

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## Other Finding Aids

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### Available at Repository

Folder list is available at the repository.

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## Use of Records

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### Access Restrictions

There are no restrictions regarding access to or use of the material.

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## Access Terms

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- Military readiness
- New York (State)
- Maps (documents)
- Land use surveys
- Protecting
- Photographs
- Military policy
- Rockaway Beach (New York, N.Y.)
- Jamaica Bay (N.Y.)
- Fortification--New York (State)
- Coast defenses--New York (State)
- Highway planning
- Land titles--Registration and transfer
- United States--Defenses
- Maintaining infrastructure
- New York (N.Y.)
- Minutes (administrative records)
- Roads--Design and construction
- Administering land use
- Testimony
- Bills (legislative records)
- Queens County (N.Y.)
- Sherrill, Charles H.
- Smith, R.A.C.
- New York (State). State Engineer and Surveyor
- New York (State). Adjutant General's Office
- New York (State). State Engineer and Surveyor
- New York (State). Superintendent of Public Works
- New York (State). Department of Transportation
- Lewis, Merton E.
- Mitchel, John Purroy, 1879-1918.
- New York (State). Adjutant General's Office
- Stotesbury, Louis W.
- Wotherspoon, William W.

- Rockaway Pacific Corporation
- Travis, Eugene M.
- New York (State). Superintendent of Public Works
- Williams, Frank M.