



Essex County Veterans Memorial Park serves to honor all local veterans of the United States Armed Forces. The park opened in 2009 adjacent to the Essex County Government Complex where a parking garage once stood. At its center, each branch of the U.S. military is represented with a flag and an official seal along a low granite wall. Dedicated “Staff Sgt. Jorge Oliveira Plaza,” this spot memorializes the 10-year employee of the Sheriff’s Office who was killed in 2011 in Afghanistan.



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*Putting Essex County First*

“Our Essex County Parks System has played a major role in both the lives of our residents and in events that have shaped our country. The open spaces we now enjoy for recreation and the land on which they are located have close connections to our country’s war efforts from the Revolutionary War to today. We hope you find this brief history interesting and gain a new perspective on our Parks System.”

Joseph N. DiVincenzo, Jr.



## Civil War

Camp Frelinghuysen



In July of 1862, land adjacent to the Morris Canal, south of Park Avenue and just west of the current Southern Division of Branch Brook Park, was commandeered to be used for a camp for the training of men during the Civil War. Six New Jersey regiments were mustered in here at Camp Frelinghuysen between 1862 and 1864. These regiments, which included the 13<sup>th</sup>, 26<sup>th</sup>, 27<sup>th</sup>, 33<sup>rd</sup>, 37<sup>th</sup>, and 39<sup>th</sup>, collectively were involved in some of the most critical battles throughout the Civil War “from Antietam to Appomattox.” A plaque commemorating the 50th anniversary of the camp was installed by students of Barringer High School on May 30, 1912. For many years, the plaque was located in Branch Brook Park closest to the camp’s location on a boulder brought from South Mountain Reservation.

## Revolutionary War

Battle of Second River



When the British took New York City, George Washington and his troops retreated through Newark. Pursuing them in September 1777, British General Clinton advanced with 600 troops and began firing on the village of Second River (present-day Belleville). Soon, militia reinforcements led by American General Winds arrived. General Clinton then called for his troops to march toward Newark. Forced to fall back, Winds and his militiamen retreated to Mill Street and what is now Essex County Belleville and Branch Brook Parks. Here on September 13, they took their position with three cannons, but were forced to fall back to Bloomfield when a large number of British troops advanced on their position. The skirmish ended when General Clinton pulled his troops back on another assignment.

Later in the war, while General Washington’s Continental Army was encamped at Morristown, lookouts were stationed at critical points along the Watchung Mountains. On June 23, 1780, the British attacked Hobart’s Gap, one of the few places to pass through the natural barricade. Seeing them advance, an American lookout on the mountain crest, at what is now the southern end of Essex County South Mountain Reservation, lit a signal beacon to alert the Essex County and Newark Militia. At the conclusion of the fighting, the Americans prevailed. Local lore held that George Washington stood at this point to oversee the maneuvers of his troops in the ensuing battle, hence the name “Washington Rock.”

Washington Rock



# World War I

## Aiding the War Effort

As the United States entered World War I in 1917, the Essex County Parks became heavily involved in aiding the war effort. Various militia companies held maneuvers at South Mountain Reservation, Weequahic Park, and Branch Brook Park. The Park Commission formed a War Savings Committee, and was even commended by the U.S. Treasury Department for its success. Even children in the summer recreation programs became involved in the effort as they made bandages and other items for the Red Cross.

In Belleville and Grover Cleveland Parks, which were being developed, instead of seeding the freshly graded land with grass, the future lawn areas were planted with corn. Similarly, in the spirit of Victory Gardens, corn and potatoes were planted in South Mountain Reservation, and tomatoes grew in the greenhouses in Branch Brook Park. The Commission reported that the surplus of their crops was given to municipal authorities to distribute as needed. In addition, in order to aid with the fuel shortage, trees were carefully thinned from Eagle Rock and South Mountain Reservations following the advice of forestry experts, and the lumber was sold to the public as firewood.



## Experiments at Eagle Rock

In 1917, portions of the large pavilion on the crest of the mountain at Essex County Eagle Rock Reservation were turned over to the government to be used for experimental purposes. Here, with the Atlantic Ocean in view, Thomas Edison conducted war experiments for the U.S. Navy, including investigating innovative technologies for submarine warfare. In a February 17, 1917 article by the New York Times entitled “Edison is Working on New War Device,” some of Edison’s inventions are documented, including a 16-foot model of a submarine and a telescope that “brought New York so close it seemed you could reach out and touch the buildings.”

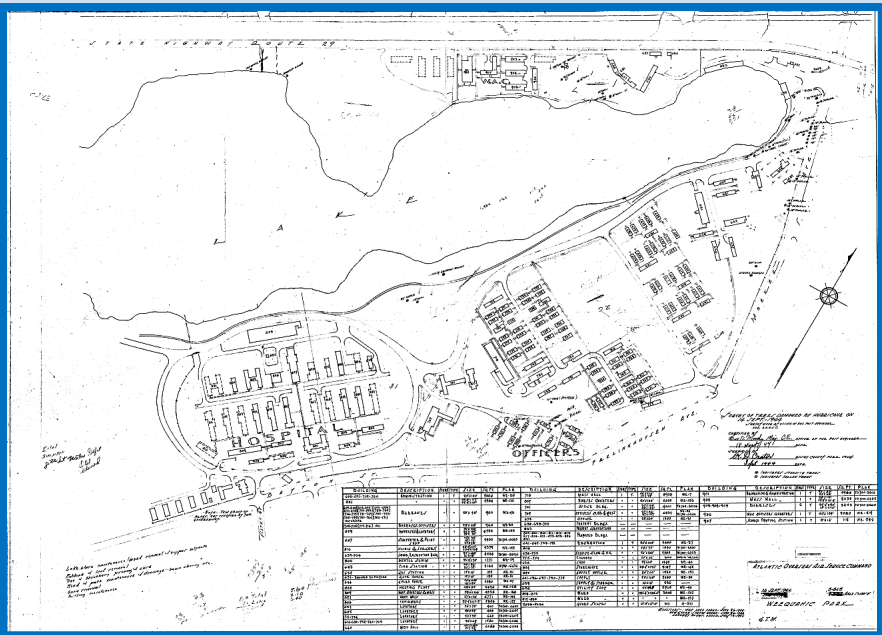


However, Edison was apparently not the only scientist conducting experiments for the war effort at Eagle Rock Reservation during this time. Optical physicist and founder of the Optical Society of America Perley G. Nutting, who was working for the Westinghouse Electric Corporation at that time, was also given permission to conduct tests for the government from the building.

# World War II

## Army Occupations of Essex County Parks

As early as December 1941, soon after the United States entered World War II, areas of Branch Brook Park Extension and Riverbank Park were utilized by the Area Control Air Defense contingent of the Coast Artillery Division. Then in February 1943, because of Weequahic Park’s close proximity to the airport, the U.S. War Department proposed to lease much of that park. Altogether, 164 acres were occupied by the Atlantic Overseas Air Service Command, and the lake was closed to the public. A series of barracks, officer quarters, a hospital, and auxiliary buildings were constructed.



The military facilities at Branch Brook and Riverbank were vacated before the end of the war. A portion of Weequahic Park was restored for use by the public in 1948. However, the oval track area was turned over to the State of New Jersey to provide urgently -needed housing for returning veterans and their families into the 1950s.

# Cold War and Korean Conflict

## Korean War: Anti-Aircraft Bases in Parks

On July 19, 1951, after performing tests to deem whether the areas were suitable for occupation, the United States Army decided that certain New Jersey sites were necessary “in connection with the planned defenses of this metropolitan area.” Three locations in the Essex County Parks were selected for occupation. These areas were in Vailsburg Park, Belleville Park, and the Middle Division of Branch Brook Park. The sites at Branch Brook Park and Belleville Park were active installations of an anti-aircraft unit until 1957 and 1958, respectively. The Vailsburg location was utilized by the army for a somewhat longer period, with the lease expiring in 1960.

## Cold War: Riker Hill

At Riker Hill, in the western part of the county, a Cold War air defense facility was active from 1954 to 1974. This station was a part of the U.S. Army’s Nike Air Defense system, which was implemented as an anti-aircraft measure against possible attacking bombers. Designated NY-79/80, Riker Hill and land in nearby East Hanover constituted a dual installation, with radar on the hill and both Ajax and Hercules missiles below. As air defense technology continued to develop in the late 1960s, Nike sites were no longer deemed necessary. As a result, the Riker Hill facility was decommissioned in 1974 and added to the Essex County Park System a few years later.

