

# Fort Jefferson

National Monument  
Florida

National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior



Kevin A. Peer

## Largest Link in America's 19th-century Coastal Defenses

Like a strand of beads hanging from the tip of Florida, reef islands trail westward into the Gulf of Mexico. Almost 70 miles west of Key West lies a cluster of seven coral reefs called the Dry Tortugas, which, along with surrounding shoals and waters, make up Fort Jefferson National Monument. Though off the beaten track, the monument is famous for its bird and marine life, as well as for its legends of pirates and sunken gold. Its central feature, from which the monument derives its name, is Fort Jefferson, largest of the 19th-century American coastal forts.

Spanish explorer Ponce de Leon discovered these islands in 1513 and called them *Las Tortugas*—the Turtles—because of the great number of turtles he found there. (The later name, Dry Tortugas, warns the mariner that the islands contain no fresh water.) In the centuries that followed, many Spanish and British vessels cruising the Florida straits passed the Tortugas, braving both corsairs and shipwreck. Not until Florida became part of the United States in 1821 were the pirates finally driven out. Then in 1825 a lighthouse was built on Garden Key to alert sailors to rocky shoals that could bring a vessel to grief. Thirty-one years later, the present light on Loggerhead Key was erected.

The strategic importance of the Tortugas was recognized early. Naval Lt. Josiah Tattnall, who surveyed the islands in 1829, pointed out that any nation occupying the Tortugas would control navigation of the Gulf. An enemy, seizing the islands, would threaten the growing Mississippi Valley commerce which sailed the Gulf to reach the Atlantic. It was for this reason that the U.S. War Department decided to fortify the Tortugas and ordered the construction of Fort Jefferson on Garden Key.

As it turned out, Fort Jefferson, one-half mile in perimeter, became the largest link in the chain of seacoast fortifications the United States undertook to build from Maine to Texas during the first half of the 1800s. From foundation to crown, its 8-foot-thick walls stand 50 feet high. Its three gun tiers were designed for 450 guns and it was large enough to garrison 1,500 men. Planned and supervised by the U.S. Corps of Engineers, the fort was started in 1846, and, although work continued for almost 30 years, it was never finished. Prior to the outbreak of the Civil War, most of the labor force consisted of artisans from the North and slaves from Key West. After 1861 the slaves were partly replaced by imprisoned Union deserters, but slave labor did not end completely until the Emancipation Proclamation went into effect in January 1863.

Federal troops occupied Fort Jefferson throughout the Civil War, but beyond firing a few shots at passing Confederate privateers, they saw no action. The average garrison numbered 500 men, who spent most of their time building quarters for themselves and their officers. Little important work was done after 1866, for the new rifled cannon introduced during the war had already made the fort obsolete. Moreover, in 1864 engineers making subsoil experiments confirmed that the fort's foundations rested not upon a solid coral reef, as had been thought, but upon sand and coral boulders washed up by the sea. The huge structure was settling and the walls began to crack.

During the Civil War, Fort Jefferson had served as a military prison for captured deserters. For almost 10 years after the fighting stopped, it remained a prison. Among the prisoners sent here in 1865 were four of the



Kevin A. Peer

As the photograph of one of the park's living history interpreters (above, left) suggests, life for men assigned to Fort Jefferson was a long and frequently lonely ordeal. Many soldiers were unaccustomed to the isolation and the scorching temperatures.



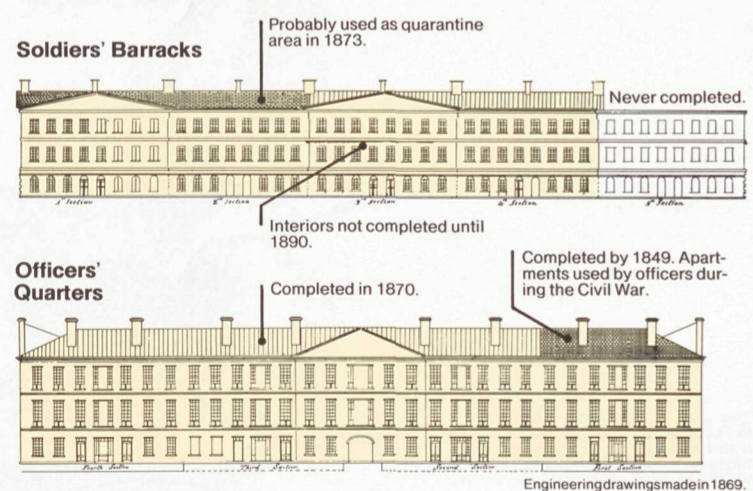
Meat spoiled in the heat. Bread baked in the fort often tasted of salt, insects, and seaweed. Cisterns built to hold rain water cracked and fresh drinking water turned brackish and putrid. Lack of fresh fruits and vegetables encouraged scurvy.

Disease was an ever-present threat, and it often meant quarantine, like that experienced by the soldiers above (right). The garrison's greatest fear, however, was yellow fever, which struck the fort with devastating effect in 1867 and 1873.

so-called "Lincoln Conspirators"—Michael O'Loughlin, Samuel Arnold, Edward Spangler, and Dr. Samuel Mudd—who had been tried and convicted of complicity in the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln. The most famous of these was Dr. Mudd, a Maryland physician who, knowing nothing of Lincoln's murder, had set the broken leg of the fugitive assassin, John Wilkes Booth. Sentenced to life imprisonment, Mudd was pardoned in 1869 for helping to fight the 1867 yellow fever epidemic that struck the fort, felling 270 of the 300-man garrison and resulting in 38 fatalities. (The cell occupied by Dr. Mudd during his years of confinement can still be seen at the fort today.)

The Army finally abandoned Fort Jefferson in 1874 following a damaging hurricane and another fever outbreak. During the 1880s the American naval fleet used the surrounding waters periodically as an anchorage, and it was from Tortugas Harbor in January 1898 that the battleship *Maine* weighed anchor for Cuba where, one month later, she blew up in Havana Harbor. The Army stationed a few troops here during the Spanish-American War, and the Navy built a coaling station here in 1898. The fort also contained one of the first naval wireless stations. In 1908 this area became a wildlife refuge to protect the Sooty Tern Rookery which had almost been wiped out by egg collectors. During World War I the Tortugas were equipped to serve as a seaplane base, but this lasted only a few months. Then the brick fort many considered the "Gibraltar of the Gulf" was quietly abandoned to the winds and the birds and the sea. Rescued from oblivion by President Franklin D. Roosevelt's 1935 proclamation naming the area a national monument, Fort Jefferson stands today a small but proud part of America's national heritage.

## Garrison Quarters



The parade ground contains the ghostly remains of two huge buildings—the Officers' Quarters and Soldiers' Barracks—which were among the first structures begun after the fort was

established. The Officers' Quarters was completed by 1870, but the Soldiers' Barracks was still unfinished when the army abandoned the fort in 1874. During the Civil War, lack of suitable

quarters forced more than 1,000 soldiers to build makeshift shelters in wooden sheds and gunrooms. Only the foundations of the Officers' Quarters and Soldiers' Barracks remain today.

## Tortugas Support Myriad Marine and Plant Life

The warm, clear waters of the Gulf of Mexico and maximum available light combine to produce optimum conditions for the development of coral reefs. These formations are associated with the shallow waters on the outer edge of offshore tropical islands. The true builders of coral reefs are small primitive animals called polyps. Over the centuries accumulations of living polyps have formed coral colonies of rigid structures, or reefs.



Tortugas harbor



French angel fish



Staghorn coral

search of food; a lobster's antennae wave frantically, trying to detect potential danger. Other strange animals, including several species of sponges of various sizes and

colors, dot the sandy bottom. Clusters of staghorn coral resemble underwater forests.

Indiscriminate hunting has diminished the sea turtle population,

but these large creatures are still observed in the Dry Tortugas area. Species seen recently include hawksbill, green, and loggerhead. Thousands of hatching green turtles have been released on the beaches of Everglades National Park and Fort Jefferson National Monument in an effort to enlarge populations. Other such releases were made throughout the Caribbean area, and more releases are planned for future years.

Although a diversity of lower animal forms inhabits the reefs, the most dominant creatures are scores of aggressive, colorful, small fishes. Vivid shades of red, yellow, green, and blue characterize the reef fishes. The varied hues serve the purposes of camouflage, recognition, warning, or as an aid to courtship. The small fish attract larger ones, including the amberjack, grouper, wahoo, and tarpon, which play an important ecological role by feeding on the smaller fish and keeping their numbers in check. All the residents of the coral reef must be constantly alert for the marauders of the sea—the ever-cruising shark and the swift barracuda. Sitting atop the food chain, these predators are essential in maintaining a natural balance in the marine habitat.

Fewer than 50 species of land plants are native to the Dry

Tortugas, because the saline soil, long droughts, and frequent storms impose severe growing conditions. Many plants have been introduced, either accidentally or for ornamental purposes. On Garden and Loggerhead Keys, the latter group includes such conspicuous plants as coconut and date palms, tamarind, Australian pine, gumbo limbo, and century plants. The native flora is mainly mangrove (or buttonwood), bay cedar, seagrape, sea-lavender, purslane, and sea oats—all typical of Florida's east coast.

## Island Keys Lure Variety of Migratory Birds



Brown pelican



Sooty tern



Noddy tern



Cormorant

One of our great national wildlife spectacles occurs each year between April and September, when the sooty terns gather on Bush Key for their nesting season. The terns come by the thousands from the Caribbean Sea and west-central Atlantic Ocean. As early as mid-January, sooties begin conducting nocturnal maneuvers over the Tortugas, spending their days at sea. Presumably, mating occurs during this time, for when they land in March, egg-laying begins immediately. Their nests are no more than depressions in the warm sand. The parents take turns

shading their single egg from the sun. When the young are strong enough for continuous flight, the colony disperses.

The presence of these tropical oceanic birds at Tortugas was recorded as early as 1513 by Ponce de Leon. Today the rookery here contains an estimated 100,000 breeding adults. A colony of brown noddies, interspersed among the sooties, comprises only about 2,500 birds, but the population is increasing. The two species share the ability to capture fish and squid from the water's surface while in flight. Large numbers of

frigatebirds also congregate at the Dry Tortugas in summer. Its 7-foot wingspan makes it one of the most graceful of soaring birds. A few blue-faced and brown boobies are observed occasionally. Roseate terns nest on Hospital, Bush, and Long Keys at the same time other terns are nesting. In season, a continuous procession of songbirds and other migrants fly over or rest at the islands, which lie across one of the principal flyways from the United States to Cuba and South America. Familiar gulls and terns of the North, plus many migratory shore birds, winter at the Tortugas.

## Isolated and Dry . . . Safe Visit Requires Preparation

Fort Jefferson is open during daylight hours only. Public transportation to the fort is available from Key West by boat and amphibious aircraft. Information on charter boats and flights can be obtained from the Key West Chamber of Commerce.

Private boaters have a prime opportunity to

visit the fort. Nautical charts for the route can be purchased at marinas and boating supply outlets in Key West. Information can be obtained in Key West from the U.S. Coast Guard Station, the Chamber of Commerce, and the Charter Boat Association. Boaters should be aware of the possibility of extremely

rough seas.

Seaplane approaches, landings, takeoffs, mooring, and docking are limited to the area within a mile of the fort itself. In summer, seaplanes must stay beyond 100 yards off Bush Key, which supports a nesting tern colony.

Since the Tortugas

are isolated, you must provide for your own existence; no housing, water, meals, or supplies are available. Camping is permitted in the grassed picnic area; grills and picnic tables are provided. No bathing facilities are available.

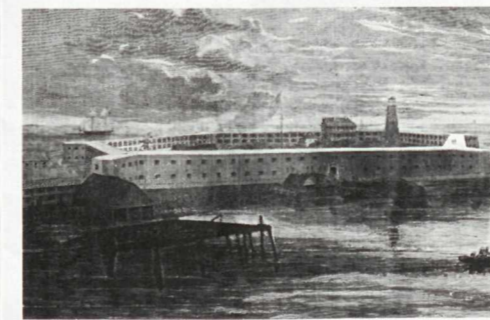
Upon arrival, plan first to see the orientation slide program, which

explains the fort's significance; then take the self-guiding tour.

Snorkelers will find marine life concentrated around patches of live coral. Swimmers can explore the fascinating coral wonderland in only 3 or 4 feet of water. Coral formations and brilliant tropical fish provide excellent

opportunities for underwater photography.

Salt-water sport fishing is good most of the year and no fishing license is required. Regulations can be obtained from personnel stationed at the fort.





# Fort Jefferson

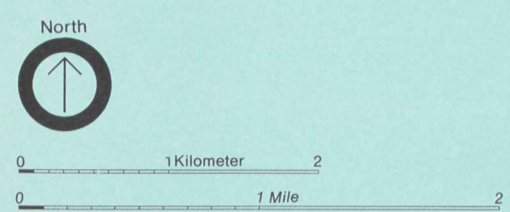
**Note: Violations of park regulations will result in a citation to appear before the U.S. Magistrate at Key West, Florida.**

Welcome to Fort Jefferson National Monument. We hope you will enjoy your visit. The National Park Service staff is here to help you. Please feel free to call upon them for information or assistance. We ask only that you assist in preserving the natural and historic resources of the monument.

Camping and sleeping is permitted only in the designated camp-ground area. Camping and living aboard boats is limited to one 14-day stay from December 1 through March 31 and May 15 through September 1. The dumping or throwing overboard of

bottles, cans, paper, or other trash on monument grounds or in monument waters is prohibited.

Please be mindful of the dangers which exist in the park, such as loose mortar and brick, dangerous wall edges, and marine life like sea urchins and fire coral.

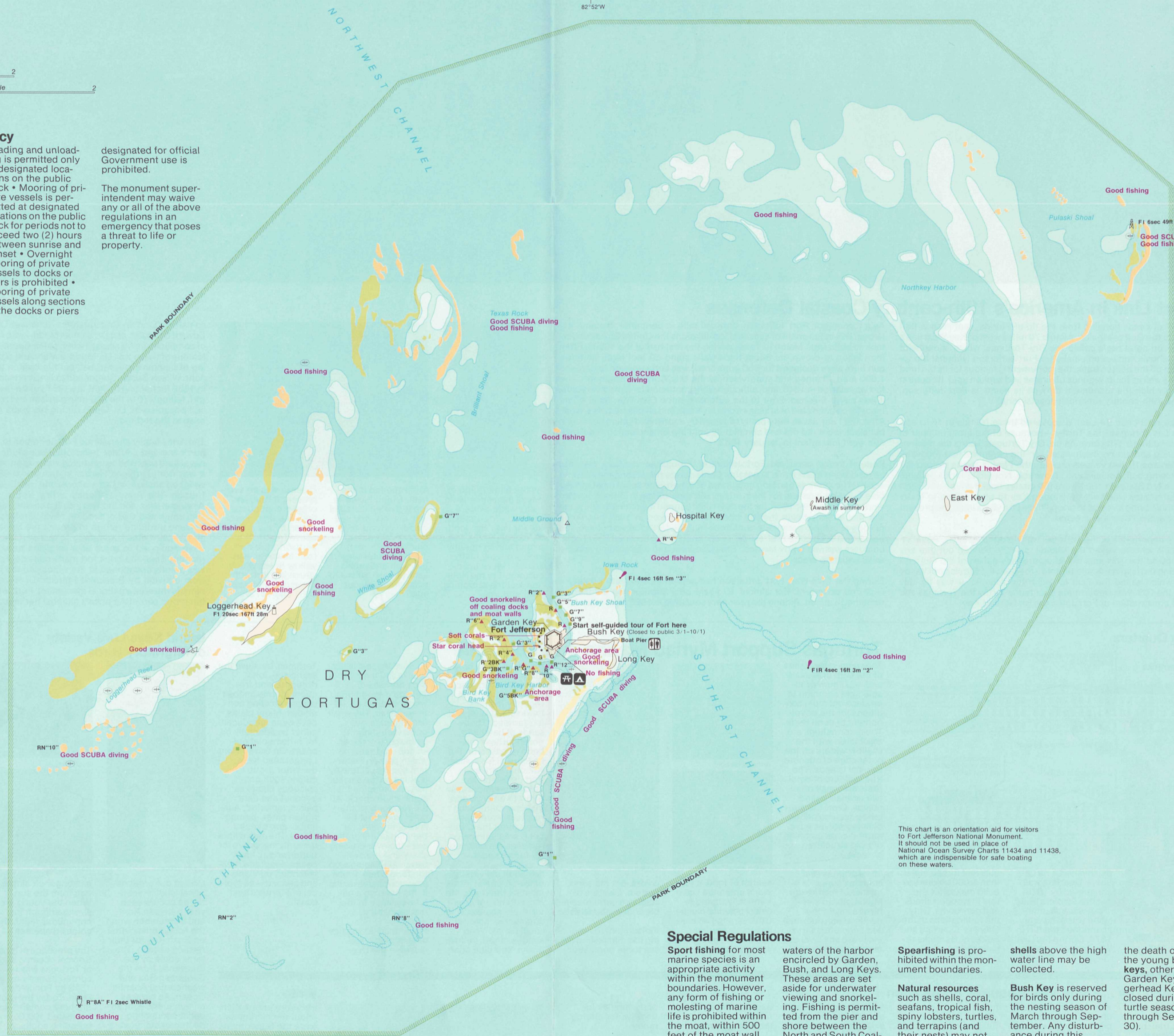


## Public Docking Policy

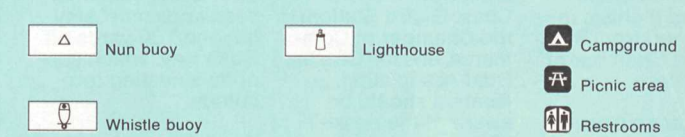
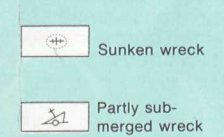
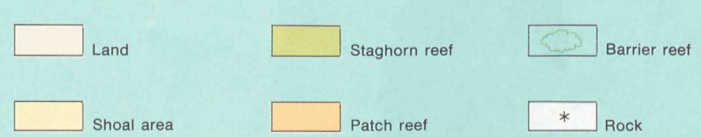
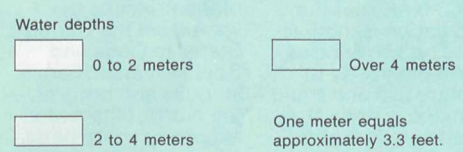
The docking facilities at Fort Jefferson National Monument are provided for the convenience of those people who wish to visit historic Fort Jefferson. They are also intended to facilitate Government operations associated with the management of the national monument. Visitors using the docking facilities are required to observe the following regulations:

Loading and unloading is permitted only at designated locations on the public dock. Mooring of private vessels is permitted at designated locations on the public dock for periods not to exceed two (2) hours between sunrise and sunset. Overnight mooring of private vessels to docks or piers is prohibited. Mooring of private vessels along sections of the docks or piers

designated for official Government use is prohibited. The monument superintendent may waive any or all of the above regulations in an emergency that poses a threat to life or property.



This chart is an orientation aid for visitors to Fort Jefferson National Monument. It should not be used in place of National Ocean Survey Charts 11434 and 11438, which are indispensable for safe boating on these waters.



## Special Regulations

**Sport fishing** for most marine species is an appropriate activity within the monument boundaries. However, any form of fishing or molesting of marine life is prohibited within the moat, within 500 feet of the moat wall, and in the shallow

waters of the harbor encircled by Garden, Bush, and Long Keys. These areas are set aside for underwater viewing and snorkeling. Fishing is permitted from the pier and shore between the North and South Coal-ing Docks.

**Spearfishing** is prohibited within the monument boundaries.

**Natural resources** such as shells, coral, sea fans, tropical fish, spiny lobsters, turtles, and terrapins (and their nests) may not be disturbed. **Dead**

shells above the high water line may be collected.

**Bush Key** is reserved for birds only during the nesting season of March through September. Any disturbance during this period can result in

the death of many of the young birds. **All keys**, other than Garden Key and Loggerhead Key, are closed during the turtle season (May through September 30).