



Fort Barrancas



Situated on the bluffs overlooking Pensacola Bay, Fort Barrancas was built to protect the United States from foreign invaders. Once considered vital to national defense, today Fort Barrancas illustrates the evolution of military technology and American values.

Building the Fort 1839-1844

After Spain's cession of Florida to the United States in 1819, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers dispatched officers to survey the new coastline. The U.S. Navy selected Pensacola Bay to become the site of its main navy yard on the Gulf Coast. In order to protect the navy yard and the bay, the U.S. Army built permanent coastal fortifications.

Built between 1839 and 1844, Fort Barrancas was the third fort established on the bay. It was constructed over the ruins of a 1798 Spanish fort named Fort San Carlos de Barrancas. Situated below the barrancas (Spanish for bluffs) was a 1797 water battery named Bateria de San Antonio. The water battery was retained and modified for use by the Army.

The planned armament for the fort included: ten 24-pounders (pdrs); two 8-inch seacoast howitzers; five 18-pdrs; three 12-pdrs; one 8-inch mortar; two coehorn mortars; two field 6-pdrs and one field 12-pdr; and eight 24-pdr flank howitzers in the counterscarp. The water battery included eleven 32-pdrs; two 8-inch seacoast howitzers; and two 10-inch mortars.

Major William H. Chase was the Army's Superintending Engineer. Chase contracted a company to lease enslaved men to work as laborers and tradesmen to build the fort. From March 21 to September 21, the enslaved labored from sunrise to sunset, with one hour for both breakfast and dinner.

The Civil War 1861-1865

When Abraham Lincoln became president-elect in November 1860, Southern slaveholding states began seceding or talked of seceding from the Union. A national crisis had begun.

On January 8, 1861, 1st Lieutenant Adam Slemmer ordered Company G, 1st U.S. Artillery to guard Fort Barrancas to prevent its seizure by Florida. On January 10, Slemmer evacuated the mainland forts in favor of Fort Pickens. That same day Florida seceded from the Union.

Forts Barrancas and McRee, Advanced Redoubt, and the navy yard were occupied by Florida and Alabama militia on January 12. Fort Barrancas was used to organize and train Confederate soldiers. These soldiers used the fort's cannon

in a bombardment against Fort Pickens on November 22 and 23, 1861. Confederate Major General Braxton Bragg wrote: "For the number and caliber of guns and weight of metal brought into action it will rank with the heaviest bombardment in the world."

The Confederate army evacuated Pensacola in May 1862. After sixteen months U.S. soldiers reclaimed Fort Barrancas. Some regiments that garrisoned the fort composed free and enslaved black men. These regiments included the 14th Regiment, Corps d'Afrique, 25th United States Colored Troops (USCT), 82nd USCT, and the 97th USCT. Private George Mitchell of Company G, 25th USCT, was a former slave who fought for his freedom at Fort Barrancas.

U.S. Coastal Defense 1885-1947

Fort Barrancas became obsolete because of new developments to cannon and naval war vessels. In 1885 the U.S. government began evaluating proposals for new coastal defenses, and an 1893 survey deemed Pensacola Bay commercially and militarily important.

In 1902 Fort Barrancas was equipped with a Fire Commander's Station and general secondary stations to help direct artillery fire from Santa

Rosa Island and Perdido Key. By 1914 the fort received a radio station and two steel masts. The Coast Artillery Corps was responsible for these defenses through World War II. Fort Barrancas was declared surplus in 1947.

As military technology and American values evolved, the mission for Fort Barrancas remained the same – protect the bay and the laws, principles, and lives of American citizens.

Guide to Fort Barrancas

1. Glacis: This gentle earthen slope protected the fort from land-based artillery while exposing attacking infantrymen.

2. Scarp and Counterscarp: The main walls (scarp) supported the barbette which provided defense against both ships and infantry. The outer walls (counterscarp) supported the glacis and provided loopholes for muskets and embrasures for cannon to fire into the ditch.



3. Ditch: A dry ditch covered two sides of the fort. Assaulting infantrymen who entered the ditch would suffer heavy casualties from musket and cannon fire through openings in the walls.

4. Drawbridge: Operated by a counterweight and winch, it pivoted at the center. It could be raised to isolate the fort's scarp from a land-based attack.

5. Sally Port: The main entrance to the fort was guarded by heavy oak doors. A small wicket gate allowed entry without opening the main doors.

6. Guard Room: This room had four bunks and a six-man guard detail. Soldiers rotated with two men on guard duty (2-hours on, 4-hours off, for 24-hours) while four men rested. The main barracks were to the east of the fort.

7. Scarp Gallery: A series of arches supported the sand fill and allowed access to the loopholes for muskets. Vertical vents above the loopholes allowed smoke from the guns to escape.

8. Counterscarp Gallery: A tunnel under the ditch leads to this casemated area, containing loopholes for muskets, embrasures for cannon, and powder magazines to allow reverse fire into the ditch.

9. Parade: This open area is where troops were inspected or drilled. The foundation in the corner indicates where a hot shot furnace, in which round shot was heated before firing, once stood.

10. Water Battery: The tunnel from the parade leads to the water battery. Cannon projectiles from the battery ricocheted off of the surface of the bay to hit ships at the water line.



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