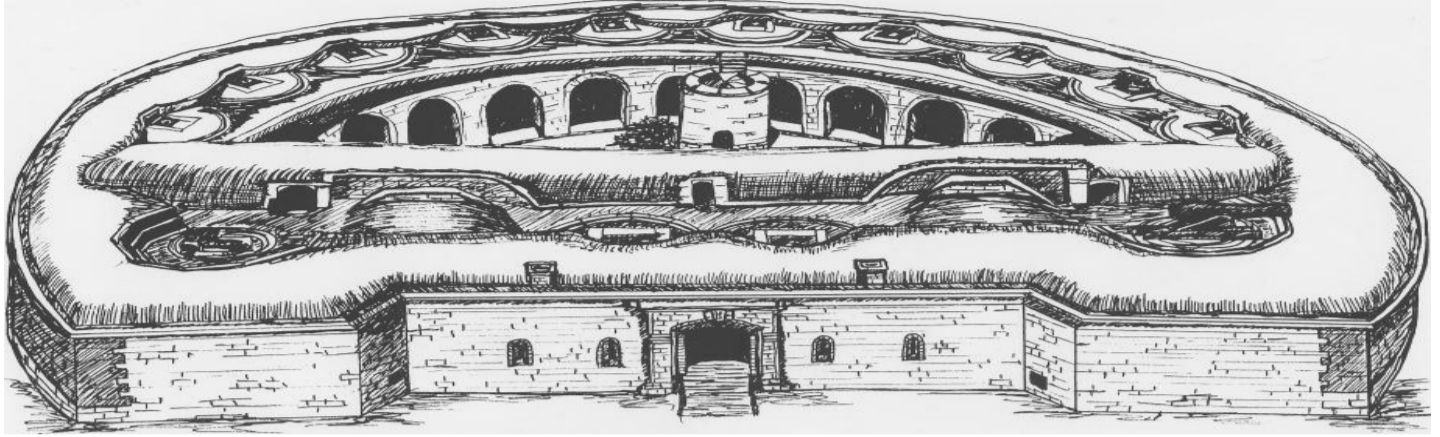




Fort Massachusetts



Coastal Protection In December of 1814, 10,000 British soldiers rendezvoused at Ship Island before attacking New Orleans, Louisiana. That same year many of the same troops had bombarded the defenses of Baltimore, Maryland, and burned the White House in Washington, D.C. Caught off guard, military leaders became painfully aware that the nation was vulnerable to foreign invasion. As a consequence, the U.S. War Department planned a system of brick fortifications known as Third System Forts. They were all challenging to construct. Fort Massachusetts, 12 miles off the Mississippi coastline, was one of the most difficult to build. In fact, it was never completed.

Strategic Importance Ship Island was considered for a fort because of its deep-water harbor, location along a major shipping route, and previous military history.

Debate surfaced on whether a fort was really necessary off the Mississippi coast. Some U.S. military officers argued that the shipping lanes could

be better protected by naval patrols. Finally, Mississippians, including Secretary of War Jefferson Davis, pressured Congress for the fort. The argument was settled when Congress and President Franklin Pierce approved the construction of the last U.S. brick fortification built on the Gulf Coast.

Construction Delays From the onset of construction in 1859, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers was faced with obstacles. Living conditions, including isolation on the island, were difficult for the workers. The first superintendent died from yellow fever. Storms destroyed partially completed sections of the fort. After two years, only eight feet of the outer fort walls had been constructed.

The Civil War created even greater problems. In January of 1861, Mississippi secessionists seized the unfinished fort and forced the workers off the island. The Confederates then built up the fort with timbers and sandbags. In July, Union sailors aboard the USS Massachusetts maneuvered the steamship within range of the western end of Ship Island. A brief exchange of cannon shots took place until Union sailors steered their vessel to safer waters. Although the Confederates claimed victory, they vacated the island that fall.

Building resumed after Union troops retook control of the fort and the island. Masons, carpenters, and other workers had to be hired from northern states. Bricks and additional construction materials were shipped from as far away as New England.

The island was teeming with thousands of construction workers, as well as Union sailors and soldiers, including the African-American Louisiana Native Guards. Confederate prisoners of war and Union convicts were held captive as well. Isolated and far from loved ones, many became homesick.

"What a God forsaken place this is--No news from home or anywhere else--I fear that Gen. Butlers expedition has been abandoned, if so what will become of us where shall we be sent?"

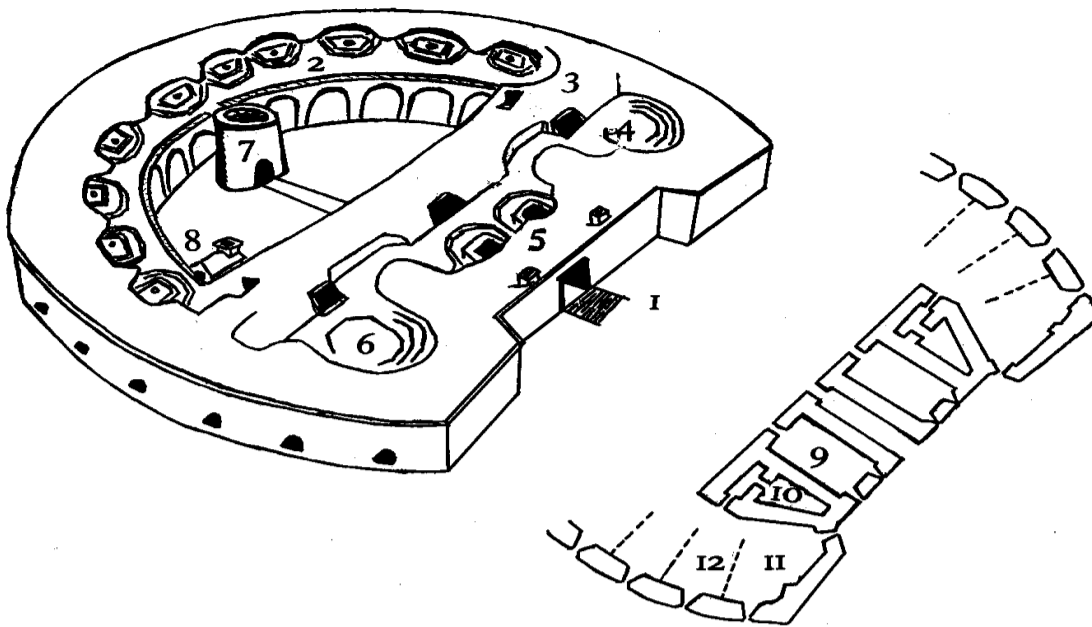
Union Colonel Edward Jones, January 21, 1861.

Aftermath

Completed in 1866, the fort's cannon defenses were never fully installed. In 1873 the two 15-Inch Rodman Cannons were mounted when the U. S. felt threatened by the Spanish Navy. This threat never materialized. The fort's cannons were never fired, and the iron was sold as scrap in 1901.

Despite the end of its use as a military stronghold, the fort's splendor and history have drawn people to Ship Island for years. In the 1960s, concerned, local residents formed a "Save the Fort" committee in the hope of preserving this structure from further deterioration due to beach erosion. Those efforts helped establish Gulf Islands National Seashore in 1971.

A Tour of Fort Massachusetts



Step Back in Time Take a stroll through history to see how Fort Massachusetts was planned to oppose enemy naval forces. As you wander, be careful of uneven walkways, dark areas, and slippery places. Ramps allow access into the fort's guard rooms on the lower level.

1. Sally Port The fort was designed with only one entrance, the sally port. The word *sally* means "to rush forth." A drawbridge was planned but was never completed.

2. Observation Area Located to the west and between West Ship Island and the distant Cat Island is Ship Island Pass. It is one of the few natural deepwater channels in the Mississippi Sound. The channel was part of an important navigation route to and from New Orleans.

When Fort Massachusetts was completed in 1866, the west end of the island was 500 feet from the fort. Today, the west tip is over a mile away. This is due to the natural movement and redeposit of sand from the island's east end. In 2006 Hurricane Katrina covered the fort with 30 feet of storm surge.

7. Stair Tower Because of the fort's size spiraling granite staircases were designed to use less space and provide protection against enemy fire.

8. Hot Shot Furnace This coal fired furnace was built to heat 60 six-to-ten-inch diameter cannon balls. Red hot ammunition could damage and set wooden ships on fire. Special tools were used to carry hot cannon balls from the furnace to the cannons. Although common to coastal forts, this furnace was never used here.

3. Parados and Service Magazines The upper level of the fort was divided by large earthen embankments, or parados, which provided additional protection to the cannon positions and storage for powder and ammunition. Four service magazines are on this level. The main magazines are on the lower level.

4. 15-Inch Rodman Cannon The 15-inch Rodmans were among the largest smoothbore cannons manufactured with barrels weighing 50,000 pounds. These cannons could fire a 400-pound cannon ball three miles. In 1873 men using a system of *block and tackle*, slowly raised two Rodmans over the outside wall and mounted them into position.

5. 100 Pound Parrot Rifles These rifled cannons fired bullet shaped projectiles which would spin on their axels. Unlike cannon balls,

9. Guardrooms Rooms, one on either side of the sally port, were to defend the fort's only entrance. The narrow openings in the wall permitted the guards to observe enemy fire and protected the riflemen. These rooms could house soldiers, but most lived in tents or wooden barracks outside the fort.

10. Powder Magazines Next to the guardrooms, powder magazines stored the fort's supply of black powder. The magazines were lined with wood to keep the powder dry. Local folklore often referred to the power magazines

projectiles fired from rifled cannon had greater range, accuracy, and destructive power. The two Parrot rifles on top of Fort Massachusetts, would protect the fort's eastern flank. The development of rifled cannon was one of the factors that eventually made masonry fortifications obsolete.

6. Cannon Debris Although the fort was designed to hold 37 cannons, only 17 were permanently mounted during the crisis involving Spain in the 1870s. The remaining debris was leftover after an attempt to dynamite the obsolete cannons. Some pieces were hauled away as scrap metal in the early 1900s.

as dungeons, but there is no evidence supporting that story.

11. Half Bastions The areas that project out at each end of the fort's east wall, known as half bastions, extend the cannon's field of fire. These half bastions were designed to provide cross fire to protect the entrance.

12. Casemates Thirteen 10-inch Rodman cannons were mounted in this level of the fort in 1873. Each cannon was positioned to fire through an opening in the wall, the embrasure, which was protected by a heavy iron shutter.