



Fort Pickens



Engineering Fort Pickens

Fort Pickens was built by the US Army to protect Pensacola Bay and a US Navy Yard. While safeguarding these valuable assets, Fort Pickens endured battles against man and nature alike.

The fort's design was influenced by the island's geography, its proximity to Pensacola, the importance of the channel, and money. The structure was designed with two levels along five walls that could mount over 200 cannon. In times of war, about 1,000 soldiers could fight inside the fort's 58 casemates or on the barbette above.

In order to construct the fort quickly and effectively, Captain William H. Chase hired a contractor with 100 enslaved craftsmen of African descent. Fort Pickens was built between 1829 and 1834, and similarly to many federal facilities erected during this time, it was built by those in servitude for the benefit of the free. These laborers were exposed to disease, intense heat, and high humidity. Near its completion, Fort Pickens was named after Brigadier General Andrew Pickens, a patriot who fought with distinction during the American Revolution.

The completion of Fort Pickens was only the beginning of a long effort to protect the Pensacola Bay area and the United States. The US Army later built Fort McRee in 1839 and Fort Barrancas in 1845, and began constructing Advanced Redoubt in 1845. These forts were the products of engineering, technology, and innovation, and became notable landmarks of American identity.

Part of a National System

The forts built around Pensacola Bay were the result of conflicts between 1785 and 1815 which threatened the United States' independence and trade. After the War of 1812, Congress launched the Third System of Coastal Fortifications to defend the country. In 1816, Congress convened the Board of Engineers to execute this program.

Army engineers customized forts in this system to specific locations and used durable materials, including bricks and stone. Engineers incorporated bombproof rooms with windows, called casemates and embrasures, in every fort. Casemates enabled engineers to build forts with multiple levels, increasing the number of cannon at one location.

From about 1820 to 1867, these engineers designed and built 42 masonry forts from Maine to Florida to California. These forts were designed to protect the country from potential foreign intrusions, while acting as important symbols of peace, power, and pride. However, internal disputes within the United States made these impressive structures flash points of civil war.

Tools of Conflicts

Fort Pickens was the focal point of a standoff between the United States and Florida in the months between the November 1860 presidential election and the first shots of the Civil War at Fort Sumter in April 1861. After Florida seceded from the Union in January 1861, the state tried seizing Fort Pickens, but US officers refused to surrender. In 1861 and 1862, the fort was involved in two bombardments against Confederate forces at Fort McRee, Fort Barrancas, and elsewhere on the mainland, but remained under Federal control. The unbroken Union presence at Fort Pickens provided a federal stronghold on the Gulf Coast and offered refuge for freedom-seeking people.

Technological advancements changed the instruments of warfare during and after the Civil War. Fort Pickens was adapted for the Pensacola Harbor Defense Project. Casemates were used to store engines to support an underwater minefield across the channel. A new defense structure, Battery Pensacola, was built inside the fort and completed in 1899. Two 12-inch guns on disappearing carriages were mounted on the battery, while ammunition and equipment were secured inside. Like Fort Pickens, Battery Pensacola became obsolete following World War II and the Fort Pickens Military Reservation was declared surplus in 1947.

What Discoveries Will You Make?

Today, the fort is a historic site that reveals principles of engineering, technology, and human innovation. It embodies the ideals of the American people, such as liberty and unity. People travel from around the world to Gulf Islands National Seashore, a part of the National Park System, to discover the fort and its stories. Share your discoveries with your family, friends, park rangers, park volunteers, park goers, or on social media (@GulfIslandsNS).

Guide to Fort Pickens

Walk through history to see how Fort Pickens was designed to defend the United States. Use designated walkways and be careful of uneven steps, surfaces, and low doorways. Do not move bricks. Help preserve your fort by practicing "Leave No Trace" principles.

1. Sally Port: Secured with heavy doors, this is the main entrance to the fort. Tracks were later installed to move ammunition and heavy equipment to Battery Pensacola.

2. Quarters: This plaster-lined room is where officers lived. Furniture, such as a bed to sleep on and a desk to write letters, made a soldier's life away from his family easier.

3. Casemates: These arched rooms provided protected artillery positions and a foundation for the barbette. Traverse stones, the granite semicircles in the floor, allowed cannon to roll left and right. Slots under the embrasures (the windows) locked gun carriages into the wall, providing a pivot point. Vents over the embrasures allowed smoke to escape.

4. Mine Battery Room: In 1894, this area was converted for electric batteries that powered a minefield across the channel. The minefield was deployed during the Spanish-American War, and remained in use until 1926.

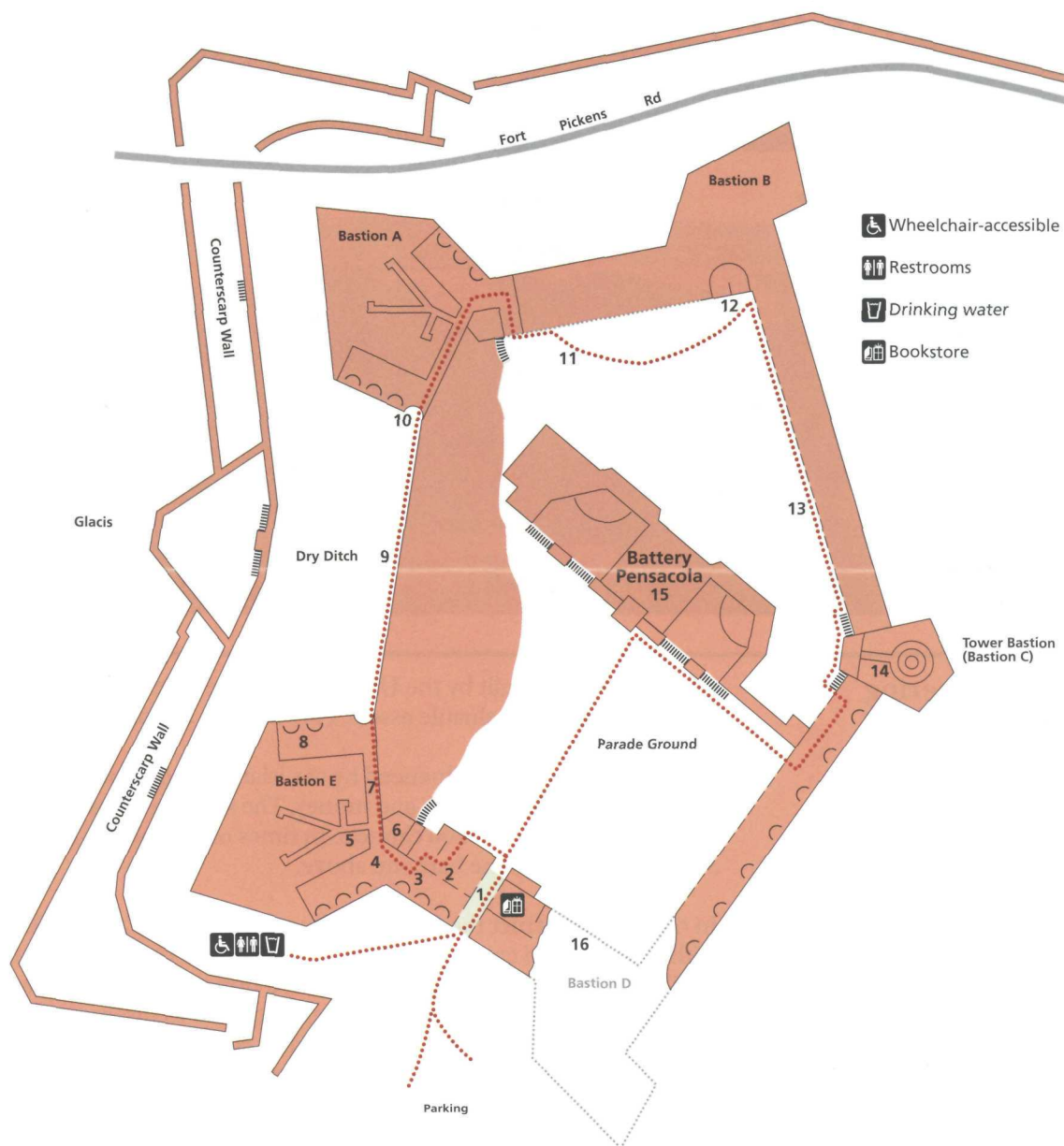
5. Mine Chambers: This tunnel system has three chambers, each designed to hold 1,027 pounds of gunpowder. If the fort was breached, defenders could blow up the chambers as a last resort, collapsing the walls on the enemy.

6. Powder Magazine: This is one of three rooms that stored the fort's gunpowder supply. Magazines were lined with wood to keep the powder dry. Anyone who entered a magazine had to remove their shoes or put socks over them to prevent sparks.

7. Shelf Supports: Still a mystery, these concrete shelf supports may have been for equipment for the minefield or Battery Pensacola.

8. Central Power Station: These concrete pads supported generators, engines, a switchboard, and storage batteries installed in 1903. Coal-powered generators provided additional electricity for lighting.

9. Counterscarp, Dry Ditch, & Bastions: The outer wall (counterscarp), located opposite the main wall (scarp), shielded the ditch. Protrusions (bastions) on the fort's corners allowed cannon to fire along the scarp. Attackers who reached the ditch would be caught in a terrible crossfire. This portion of the ditch was filled in about 1915. Before that time, the embrasures were ten feet above the ground.



10. Postern: Soldiers could use this opening as a doorway in peacetime. When battle loomed, soldiers could lay brick to create an embrasure for a cannon.

11. Battery Pensacola Tunnel: This tunnel allowed access to the south side of the fort. Although the reason is unknown today, it was sealed by 1923.

12. Cisterns: Cisterns were designed to collect rainwater from the upper level of the fort for drinking, a crucial need for the fort's soldiers.

13. Reverse Arch: To support the weight of the fort on a foundation of sand, engineers used arches. Just as the arches overhead distribute weight to the piers, the reverse arches of the foundation spread the weight of the entire structure to minimize settling. Look closely at the file marks made by enslaved men who hand cut the bricks for a proper fit.

14. Tower Bastion: The walls south of Battery Pensacola were lowered by 1916 so that its guns could have open views of targets. Today, the exposed arches allow us to understand how the fort was built.

15. Battery Pensacola: This reinforced concrete battery was built to defend against new technologies. Steel-built, steam powered warships and more powerful and accurate cannon made Battery Pensacola essential until 1933, when it was declared surplus.

16. Bastion D: This damaged pier and arch is the result of an accidental explosion in 1899, which destroyed Bastion D and created the large opening. US soldiers hung the American flag over this bastion after watching state militia capture the navy yard in January 1861.