

Gulf Islands National Seashore

Florida, Mississippi



Fort Pickens Area

The People and Stories



Protect Yourself and the Park During Your Visit

For Your Safety:



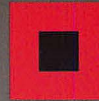
The sun can be intense. Wear sunblock.



Be mindful of uneven surfaces.



Closed areas protect you and wildlife.



Extreme weather possible.



In case of an emergency call 911.

Important Park Regulations:



Glass is not permitted on park beaches.



Pets are not permitted on park beaches.



Metal detectors are not permitted.



Unmanned aircraft are not permitted.

To learn more about the park visit our website www.nps.gov/GulfIslands

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Fort Pickens Area










Summer (March 1 - October 31): 5 a.m. to 8 p.m.
 Winter (November 1 - February 28): 6 a.m. to 6 p.m.

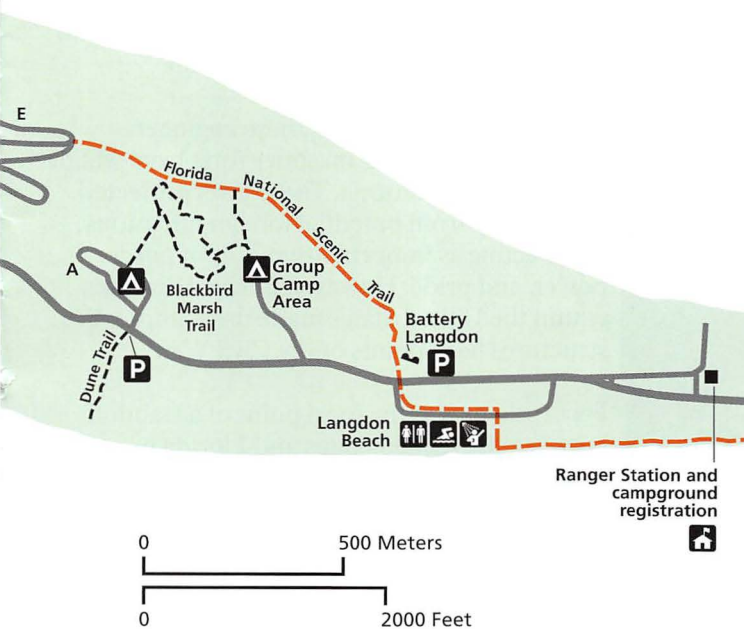
Bookstore and Discovery Center: 9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.

Campground Office: 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.





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|---|--|
|  Ranger station |  Picnic area |
|  Wheelchair-accessible |  Campground |
|  Restrooms |  Amphitheater |
|  Drinking water |  Swimming |
|  Parking |  Showers |



History of Fort Pickens

The U.S. Army built Fort Pickens to protect Pensacola Bay and a U.S. Navy Yard. While safeguarding these valuable assets, Fort Pickens endured battles against man and nature.

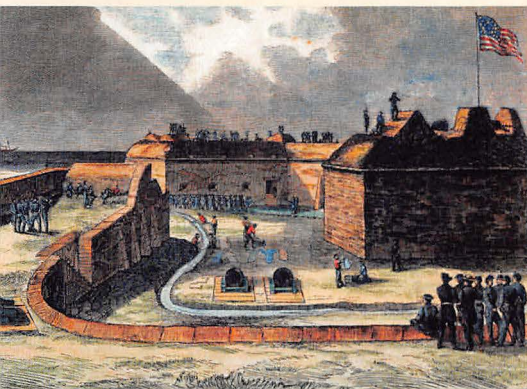
The fort's design was influenced by the island's geography, its proximity to Pensacola, the importance of the channel, and money. The structure has two levels along five walls that could mount over 200 cannon. In times of war, approximately 1,000 soldiers could fight inside the fort's casemates or on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

In order to construct the fort quickly and efficiently, Captain William H. Chase hired a contractor with at least 100 enslaved craftsmen of African descent. Fort Pickens was built between 1829 and 1834, and similar to many federal facilities erected during this time, it was built by enslaved people 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 U.S. Army later completed Fort McRee in 1839, Fort Barrancas in 1844, and began constructing Advanced Redoubt in 1845. These forts were the products of engineering, technology, and innovation that became notable landmarks of American identity.

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.

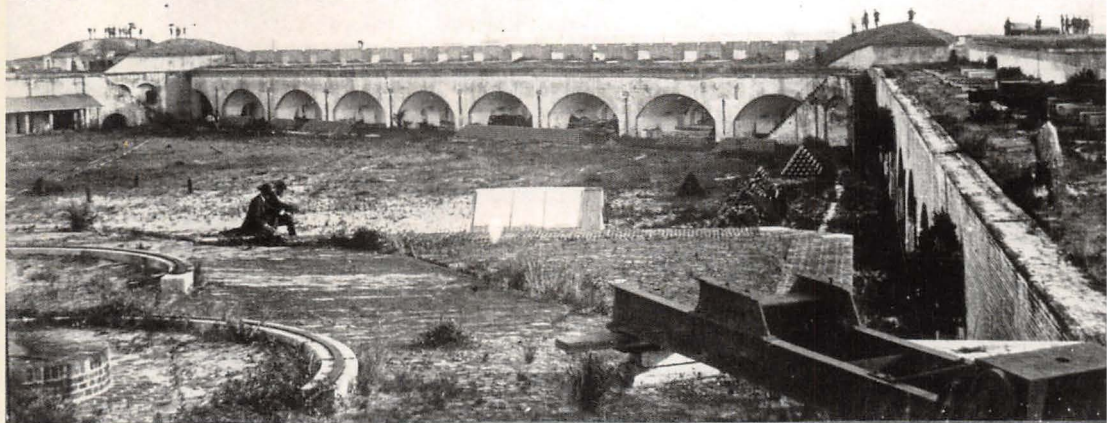
Army engineers customized forts in this system to specific locations and used durable materials, including bricks and stone. Engineers incorporated bombproof rooms with windows, called casemates and embrasures, in every fort. Casemates enabled engineers to build forts with multiple levels, increasing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

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 U.S. 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. 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. Once obsolete, the army adapted Fort Pickens for the Pensacola Harbor Defense Project. Casemates were used to store engines to support an underwater minefield across the channel. A new defense, 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. The U.S. Army declared the Fort Pickens Military Reservation surplus in 1947.

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.



Tour Fort Pickens

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 while chimneys in the rear provided fresh air from above.

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, the defenders could blow up the chambers as a last resort, collapsing the walls on the enemy.

6. Powder Magazine:

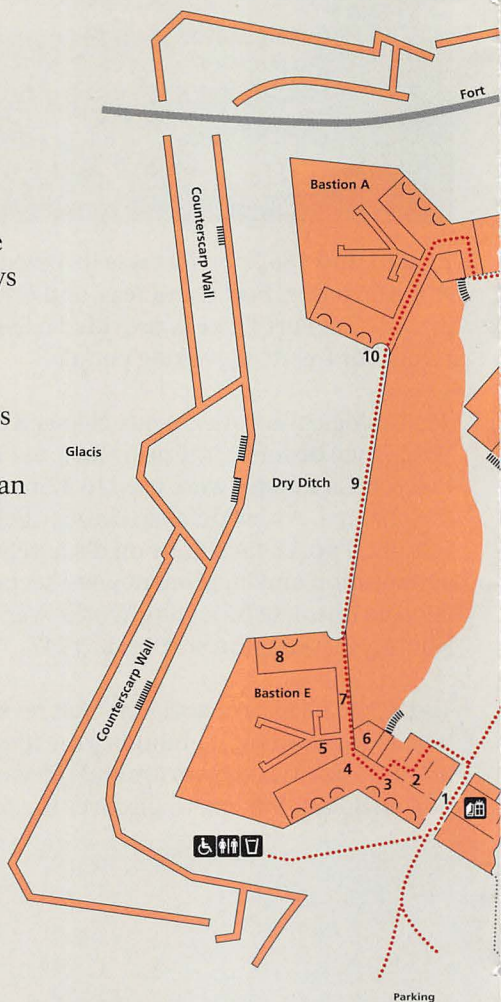
This is one of three rooms that stored the fort's gunpowder supply. Magazines were lined with wood to keep the powder dry. Anyone who entered a magazine had to remove their shoes or put socks over them to prevent sparks.

7. Shelf Supports:

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

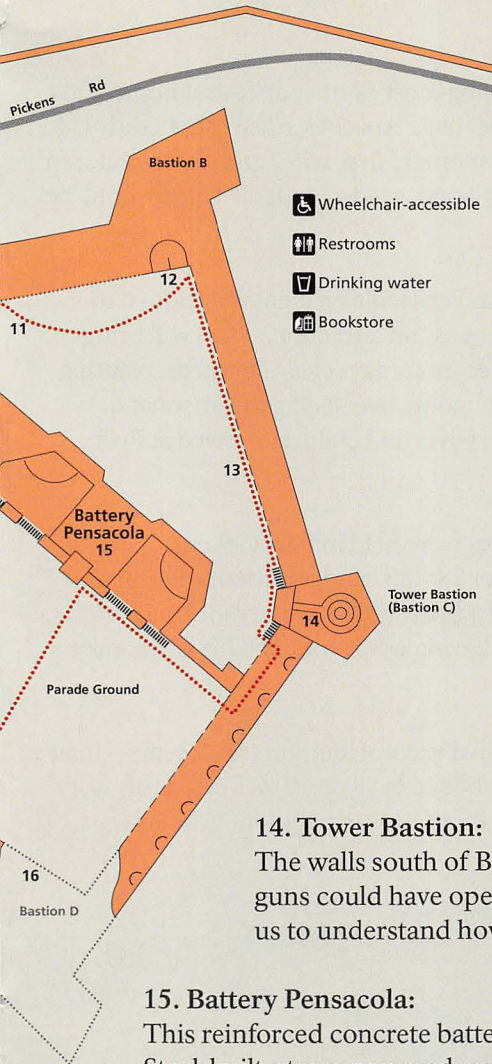
8. Central Power Station:

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. Just before a battle, 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:

Collected 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 help 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. U.S. soldiers hung the American flag over this bastion after watching state militia capture the navy yard in January 1861.

Apache Prisoners of War

In October 1886 a train pulled into Pensacola, Florida. On board were Apache prisoners of war and U.S. soldiers. The soldiers separated the Apache men from their families and forced them onto a steamer for a short trip to Fort Pickens. The women and children remained on the train bound for Fort Marion in St. Augustine, where over 450 other Chiricahua and Warm Springs Apaches were imprisoned. Goyahkla, known as Geronimo, and Naiche, the son of Cochise and hereditary chief of the Chiricahuas, were among the Apaches held at Fort Pickens until May 1888.

Westward migration resulted in American Indians losing most of their ancestral homelands. Forced onto a shrinking reservation, the Chiricahua Apaches distrusted the U.S. government. Geronimo, affected by the loss of his mother, first wife, and three children during a Mexican raid, became a fierce leader. His band evaded federal troops until he accepted peace terms in September 1886.

The U.S. government relocated the Apaches to Florida. Pensacola residents petitioned to have Geronimo and his men imprisoned at Fort Pickens as “an attraction which will bring here a great many visitors.” The prisoners worked seven-hour days clearing weeds, planting grass, and stacking cannonballs. Colonel Loomis L. Langdon, overseeing the prisoners, requested the men be reunited with their families. The wives and children arrived at Fort Pickens in April 1887.

There was one death during the 18 months the Apaches were held in Fort Pickens. Geronimo’s wife, She-gha, died of illness on September 28, 1887 and is buried at Barrancas National Cemetery in Pensacola. The Apaches moved a final time to a reservation at Fort Sill, Oklahoma in 1894. Geronimo died there in 1909, having never regained his freedom or returned to his homeland.

The Apaches lost loved ones, their lands, their traditional ways of life, and for 27 years—their freedom. The Apache population dropped 95 percent between 1850–1914. Today, this story of continued resistance against great odds can inspire thousands of people at Fort Pickens.



African Americans at Fort Pickens

When Florida joined the United States in 1821, enslaved and free people of color made up over half of Pensacola's population. In the United States, Pensacola's black community experienced a new era of violence and oppression. Their struggle and resiliency are found in places like the Fort Pickens Area.

Military construction projects on Pensacola Bay involved hundreds of enslaved African Americans. Between 1825–1859, enslaved men built the Pensacola Navy Yard, warships, and forts. Through verbal “gentlemen’s agreements,” enslaved men like Peter Dyson laid bricks in the forts and navy yard not because they chose to, but because they were forced to.

Many enslaved people saw Fort Pickens as their doorway to freedom when the Civil War started in 1861. During the war's first summer, Peter Dyson and his wife Henrietta successfully escaped to the fort. In October 1861, they sailed from Fort Pickens to New York City, and likely settled in or near the city where Peter could find work.

Some enslaved refugees remained behind at Fort Pickens. In 1862, a white Union officer at the fort observed the dangers enslaved runaways faced. “Many of the poor fellows run the greatest risk and endure the greatest hardships in escaping,” the officer wrote, “and from the frequent shots and alarms on the rebel lines nearest us, I presume some are shot in the attempt and some are frightened back.”

The Emancipation Proclamation delivered one of the final blows to U.S. slavery. In 1863, black men could officially become U.S. soldiers and sailors. By 1864, Pensacola's slave-built fortifications were being guarded by the 25th United States Colored Troops. The fort also became a classroom for reading and writing. The men attended lessons with the hope that their service would pave the road to citizenship.



Isaiah was a free man of color who fought during the Civil War. He joined Company G, 25th United States Colored Troops with his younger brother Hiram in February 1864. Isaiah served in the Color Guard, a select group given the honor of carrying the national and regimental flags.

Today, Fort Pickens stands as an expression of possibility. It is a reminder of the ongoing struggle to ensure liberty and justice for everyone. It was recently recognized as a site on the Under Ground Railroad Network to Freedom program.

Photo of Sergeant Isaiah White courtesy of the Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, Gift of Aneita Gates, on behalf of her son, Kameron Gates, and all the Descendants of Captain Williams A. Prickitt.

Coast Artillery

When Battery Langdon's guns went into action the vibrations could be felt all the way across the bay in Pensacola. McHenry Harry recalled the first time he pulled the lanyard, the cord which activated the firing mechanism: "It felt like the world was ending." His hat blew off, his pants split, and he could see concussions rippling through the sand.

Up until World War II, "homeland security" meant "harbor defense." Before airplanes and missiles, any attack on the United States required capturing harbors to unload armies and supplies. Protecting the harbors protected the country. Harbor defenses received the best technologies and most powerful weapons.

The U.S. Army created the Coast Artillery Corps (CAC) in 1901. The CAC used underwater mines, searchlights, complex target systems, and huge guns hidden behind concrete batteries. The threat of faster ships led to rapid-firing artillery while the emergence of airplanes in battle led to anti-aircraft artillery. Every new naval threat was countered by new defenses.

By the 1930s, the job of defending Pensacola Bay fell to the 13th Coast Artillery Regiment, headquartered at Fort Barrancas Army Post. A 10-minute ferry ride took the men across the bay to Fort Pickens, where a smaller army post area supported all of the active gun batteries. Once on the island, men assigned to outlying batteries boarded a narrow-gauge train, dubbed the B&F for "back and forth," that made the 3-mile run twice daily. A soldier missing the train had a tiring hike through the soft island sand to his destination.

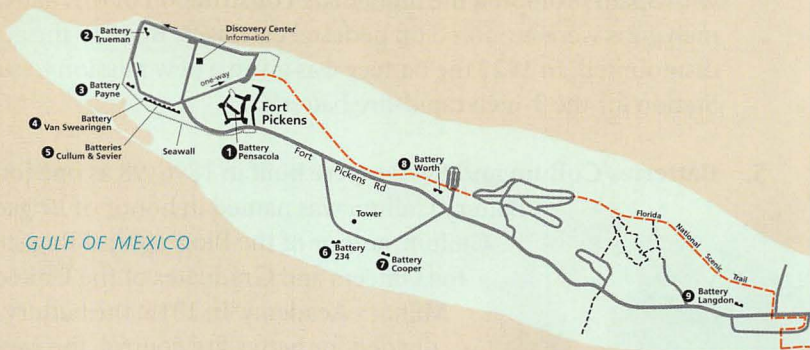
Summer encampments housed Florida National Guard units and Reserve Officers Training Corps students for training on artillery and the complex science of tracking a moving target across miles of featureless water by triangulation. For the plotting crew, the triangulation tracking system required coordinated spotting and doing complex calculations while under stress. Gun drills had far greater hazards. The guns weighed as much as 116,000 pounds, had projectiles over 1,000 pounds, and large amounts of explosives. Even when everything worked right, the concussion of firing the guns could knock a man breathless. If things went wrong, men could die.

Tensions were high after Pearl Harbor. German U-boats sank ships in the Gulf of Mexico in 1942, but by 1943 coastal threats decreased. 1943 saw the last batteries built on Pensacola Bay, though they were never armed. New technologies of that war, including jet airplanes, ballistic missiles, and the atomic bomb, made harbor defense less important.

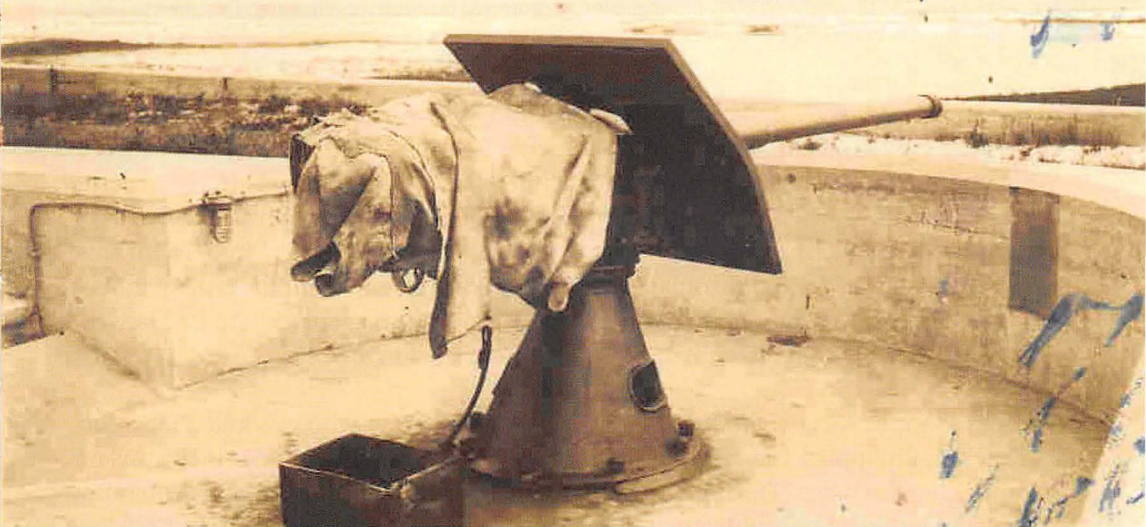
Fort Pickens and the Fort Barrancas Army Post closed in 1947. Guns, railroad tracks, and steel towers were salvaged, leaving only concrete remains. Now gulls call and children play where powerful weapons once shook the earth and stood ready to defend the country. Not long ago, these concrete artifacts were vital to homeland defense. Their time has passed even as the story continues, and new threats demand new defenses.

Tour the Batteries

Follow this guide to visit the concrete batteries on the western end of Santa Rosa Island. You may visit the structures in this guide by driving, hiking, or biking.



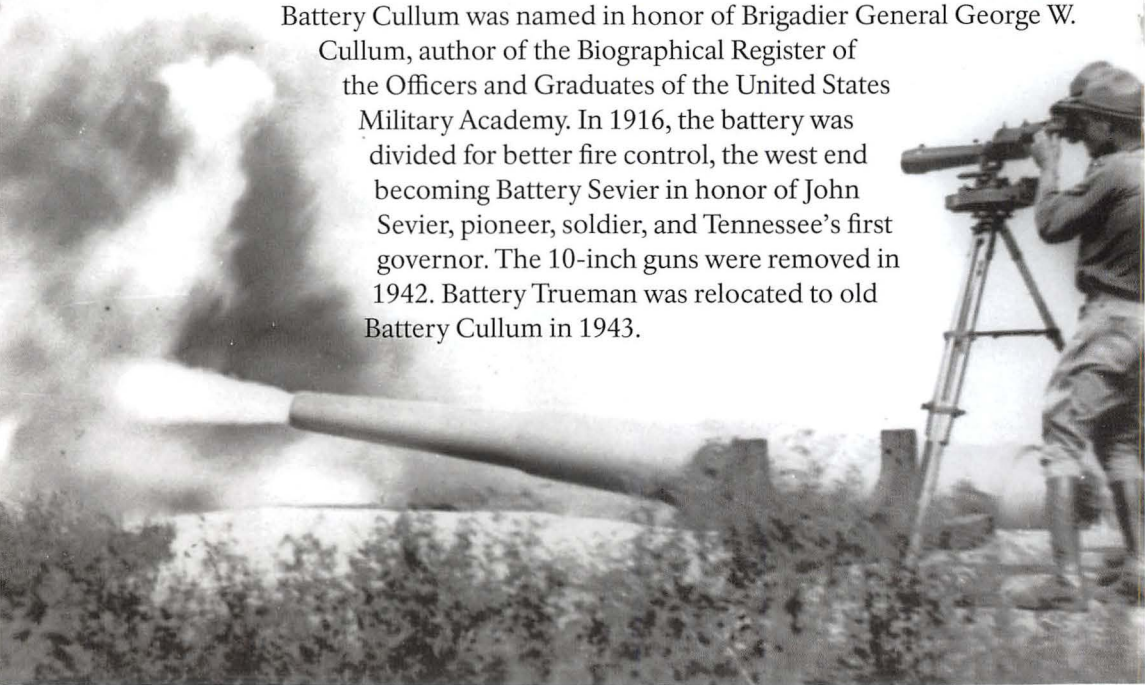
1. **Battery Pensacola**, located in the center of Fort Pickens, illustrates the evolution of coastal defenses from brick and stone fortifications to modern reinforced concrete. Completed in 1899, Battery Pensacola mounted two 12-inch rifles on disappearing carriages capable of firing 1,070-pound shells approximately eight miles. The battery was declared surplus in 1933. Its guns were removed in 1934 and its carriages sold for scrap in 1942.
2. **Battery Trueman** was named for Major Alexander Trueman of Maryland who died of wounds received in action in 1792. Built in 1905 on the western end of the island north of the harbor entrance, the battery mounted two 3-inch rapid-fire guns designed to defend the bay entrance against fast torpedo boats and minesweepers.
3. **Battery Payne** was named for U.S. Army 1st Lieutenant Matthew M. Payne of Virginia who served in both the War of 1812 and US-Mexican War (1846–1848). Constructed in 1904, Battery Payne had a similar mission as Battery Trueman.



The Bethlehem Steel Company designed and built this Model 1902 3-inch rapid-fire gun sitting on a pedestal carriage. It had a maximum range of six miles. A gun section working together could load and fire the gun's 15 pound projectiles at a maximum rate of 30 per minute.

4. **Battery Van Swearingen** was named for Captain Joseph Van Swearingen who was killed in action against the Seminoles at the battle of Okee-cho-bee. The threat of war with Spain prompted the immediate construction of this battery in 1898. Two 4.7-inch guns were mounted on pedestal carriages. By 1917 the guns were obsolete and dismantled. In 1922 the battery was given a new mission to serve as a Range Finder Station for the 3-inch rapid-fire batteries.

5. **Batteries Cullum and Sevier** were built in 1896–98 as one four-gun 10-inch battery. Battery Cullum was named in honor of Brigadier General George W. Cullum, author of the Biographical Register of the Officers and Graduates of the United States Military Academy. In 1916, the battery was divided for better fire control, the west end becoming Battery Sevier in honor of John Sevier, pioneer, soldier, and Tennessee's first governor. The 10-inch guns were removed in 1942. Battery Trueman was relocated to old Battery Cullum in 1943.



Soldiers used scopes to observe targets and firing. This Model 1888 10-inch gun sat on a disappearing carriage, which used the recoil to lower the 60,000 pound gun into a protected position for reloading. Designed to pierce armored ships, the gun had a range of 8 miles.

6. **Battery 234** and its twin, Battery 233 on Perdido Key, were designed to house 6-inch guns with curved shields from four to six inches thick cast-steel. The shields provided protection against machine gun and light artillery fire. Although the batteries received their shields and barbette carriages in 1946, the 6-inch guns were never received. The guns, shields, and barbette carriages present today were placed there in 1976 through the cooperation of the Smithsonian Institution and are identical to the type of guns that would have been emplaced by the Army. The tower adjacent to Battery 234 was to be used to direct gunfire from Battery 234's 6-inch shield guns.

7. **Battery Cooper** was named for Lieutenant George Cooper who was killed in action at Mavitac, Philippine Islands, in 1900. Battery Cooper mounted two 6-inch guns on disappearing carriages. During World War I, the guns were removed for use on railway mounts in France. The Smithsonian Institution provided the current gun in 1976, one of two remaining 6-inch disappearing guns in the country.

8. **Battery Worth** was named in honor of Brevet Major General William J. Worth who fought with distinction in the War of 1812 and US-Mexican War (1846–1848). Completed in 1899, Battery Worth housed eight 12-inch mortars in two gun pits. Four of the mortars were active until 1942. That year, the two-story tower was added, and the battery became essential for Army-Navy defense, becoming the Harbor Entrance Control Post and the Harbor Defense Command Post.
9. **Battery Langdon** was named in honor of Brigadier General Loomis L. Langdon, who served at Fort Pickens in 1861 and returned as commander in 1885. When completed in 1923 the battery boasted two 12-inch guns. During 1942–43, massive concrete casemates with walls 10-feet thick and overhead masonry 17-feet thick were added to protect the guns and crew.

The Coast Artillery Corps, a former branch of the US Army, served on Santa Rosa Island from 1901–1947. Men, like those pictured here in 1925 with 604 pound projectiles, protected America's coastlines.



Glossary of Terms

- 12-inch, 10-inch, 3-inch: The diameter of a projectile.
- Barbette: An open platform from which guns fire.
- Battery: A number of cannon supervised by a single person. Battery also refers to a structure where cannon are placed, protected, and serviced.
- Cannon: Artillery weapons like guns, mortars, and howitzers that fire projectiles using explosive propellants. “Piece” is a general term for any type of cannon.
- Carriage or Mount: The object that supports a cannon. Disappearing carriages raised a gun above the battery for firing and recoiled under cover for loading.
- Casemate: A fortified chamber from which guns fire.
- Emplacement: A designated place for a cannon..
- Gun: A long-range cannon used for firing at low angles and high speeds.
- Howitzer: A mid-range cannon used for firing at medium angles and low speeds.
- Mortar: A short-range cannon used for firing at high angles and low speeds.
- Ordnance: Artillery supplies including weapons, ammunition, vehicles, and maintenance tools.
- Projectile: An object fired from a gun by an explosive propellant, such as a bullet, shell, or solid shot.
- Rifling: Grooves cut in the surface of the bore to give a projectiles a rotating motion, making its flight more accurate.

Beyond the Batteries

Remnants of the sophisticated defensive system, scattered throughout the Fort Pickens Area, offer a glimpse into the full history of the military complex that defended Pensacola Bay and the navy base from the 1870s through the 1940s. Through documentation and research, the National Park Service has been able to piece together the individual pieces of this complex into a comprehensive understanding of the fort. Individually these elements appear to be nothing more than abandoned construction. Collectively, they illustrate a interconnected system protecting the critical deep water bay on the Gulf Coast.

Though no longer needed, relic foundations help us understand coastal defense of the early 1900s.

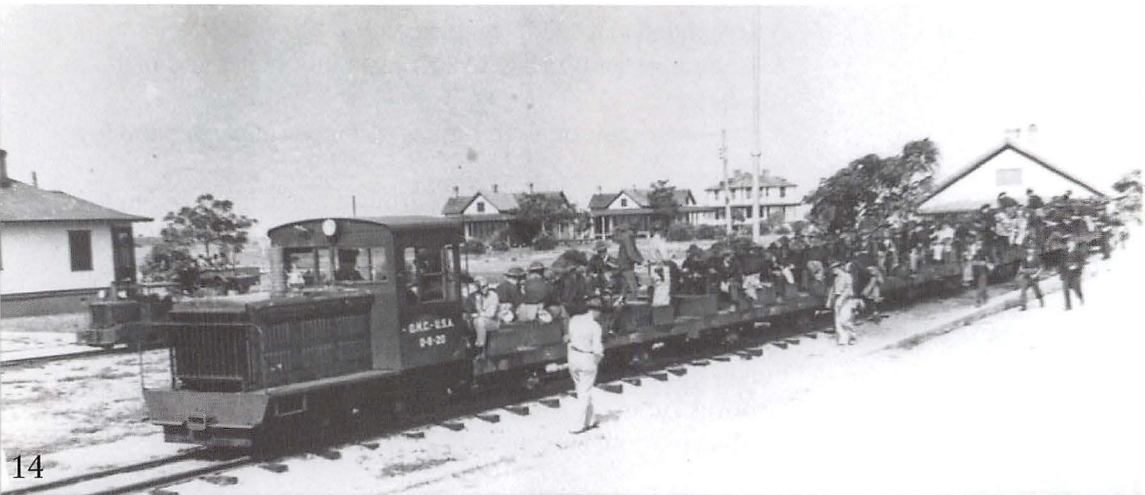
Logistics Hub

To keep the U.S. Army operational, the logistics branches have an incredible responsibility. Together, the Ordnance, Quartermaster, and Transportation Corps ensured the soldiers at Fort Pickens were able to defend Pensacola Bay. In the heart of the Fort Pickens Area, ordnance and other support supplies were stored here. Without this facility, the impressive fort and batteries around you could not have functioned.



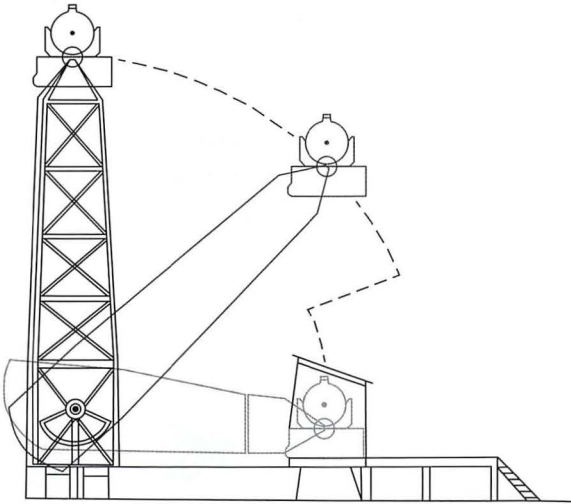
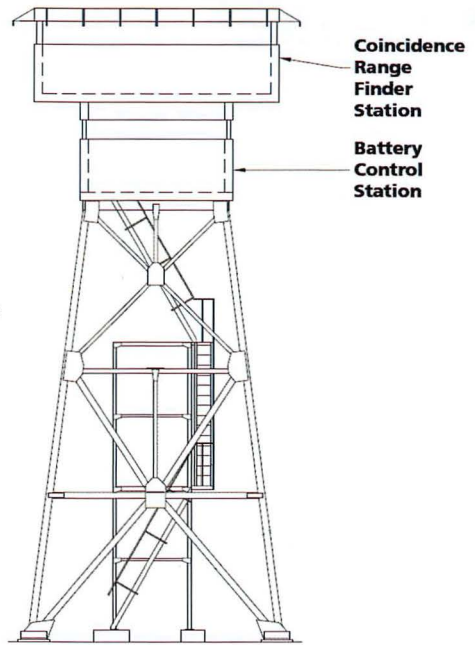
Railroad

The U.S. Army built a small-gauge railroad in 1894 to support building the massive concrete batteries at Fort Pickens. The railroad connected the engineer's wharf with each construction site as more and more batteries were added. Eventually, the railroad reached beyond the U.S. Lifesaving Station.



Towers

As artillery range and efficiency advanced through the early 1900s, improved tactics for spotting, tracking, and targeting enemy vessels were developed. These techniques employed many different measurements taken from elevated positions. On this low-lying island towers were built. All that remains of most of the towers are their footings. Though they no longer support the critical functions of defense, they support our understanding of the defense of the United States.



Searchlights

Used for a variety of missions by the Coast Artillery Corps, searchlights played an important role in defense including illuminating searching, and even blinding attacking forces. Numerous lights were used at Fort Pickens, many installed after World War I. As the production of electricity and searchlights improved, larger stationary lights were replaced by mobile lights that could be stored and deployed where and when necessary.



Habitats and Wildlife



Shorebirds

Several species of shorebirds nest and raise their chicks on the national seashore's barrier islands, including least terns, piping plovers, black skimmers, and more. Help protect these fragile creatures by remaining out of areas closed for nesting activities.

Sea Turtles

Four species of sea turtles lay nests on the barrier islands off the coast of Mississippi. Nests are laid between May and October each year, predominately at night. Reducing or eliminating outdoor lights, even inland, can help sea turtles thrive.



Sand Dunes

Anchored by sea oats and other vegetation, sand dunes hold barrier islands together. These fragile features are home to a variety of plants and animals that play a critical role in the barrier island ecosystem. Please do not walk on dunes.

Ospreys

Gulf Islands offers some of the best nesting and hunting grounds for these powerful raptors. Ospreys are territorial, especially around their nests, but they can be scared so much that they abandon their nest. Keep your distance (300 yards) from nests.



Seagrass

Seagrass meadows serve as nurseries in the shallow waters around barrier islands. These plants provide shelter to shrimp, crabs, and many species of fish. Motorized boats damage seagrass beds; boaters should push, pull, drift, or troll instead.

Share Your Experience



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