National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Gulf Islands
National Seashore

Fort Pickens
Self-guided Tour

Homeland Defense

William H. Chase graduated from West Point in 1815 and was the senior engineer on the Gulf coast from 1819 until his retirement in 1856. Although born in Massachusetts, Chase became a local landowner, slaveholder, and businessman while still on active duty with the Army. When the secession crisis struck in 1861, Colonel Chase led the southern state forces at Pensacola, in which role he unsuccessfully demanded the surrender of Fort Pickens, the very fort that began his career at Pensacola.

Fort Pickens was named after Revolutionary War hero General Andrew Pickens. He led South Carolina militia troops and fought with distinction at Fort Ninety-Six, Kettle Creek, Cowpens, and Eutaw Springs. After the war, he fought and negotiated treatries with Cherokees in Georgia and South Carolina, surveyed the boundary between North Carolina and Tennessee, and served in both Congress and the South Carolina state legislature.

"When once constructed they require but little expenditure for their support. In time of peace, they withdraw no valuable citizens from the useful occupations of life. Of themselves they can never exert an influence dangerous to public liberty; but as the means of preserving peace, and as obstacles to an invader, their influence and power are immense." (Lieutenant Henry W. Halleck "Report on the Means of National Defense" 1843.)

Seeking a means of homeland defense that would not require a large military in peacetime, the United States relied on forts to guard harbors from any invader. For over a century, Fort Pickens protected the coastline from foreign invasion. This process continued until missiles, airplanes and bombs made harbor forts obsolete.

Fort Pickens is the largest of four forts built to defend Pensacola Bay and its navy yard. Major William Henry Chase, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, supervised the project. The fort was begun in 1829, completed in 1834, and used until 1947. Over 21.5 million bricks were required, most made locally and barged to the island. Underhill and Strong of New Orleans provided a work force of skilled African-American slave labor to construct the fort. Construction of the fort was extremely difficult. Workers were exposed to an unfriendly climate, yellow fever, and experienced heat exhaustion. Major Chase was frustrated by delays in appropriations from Congress plus the sale of bootleg whiskey to soldiers.

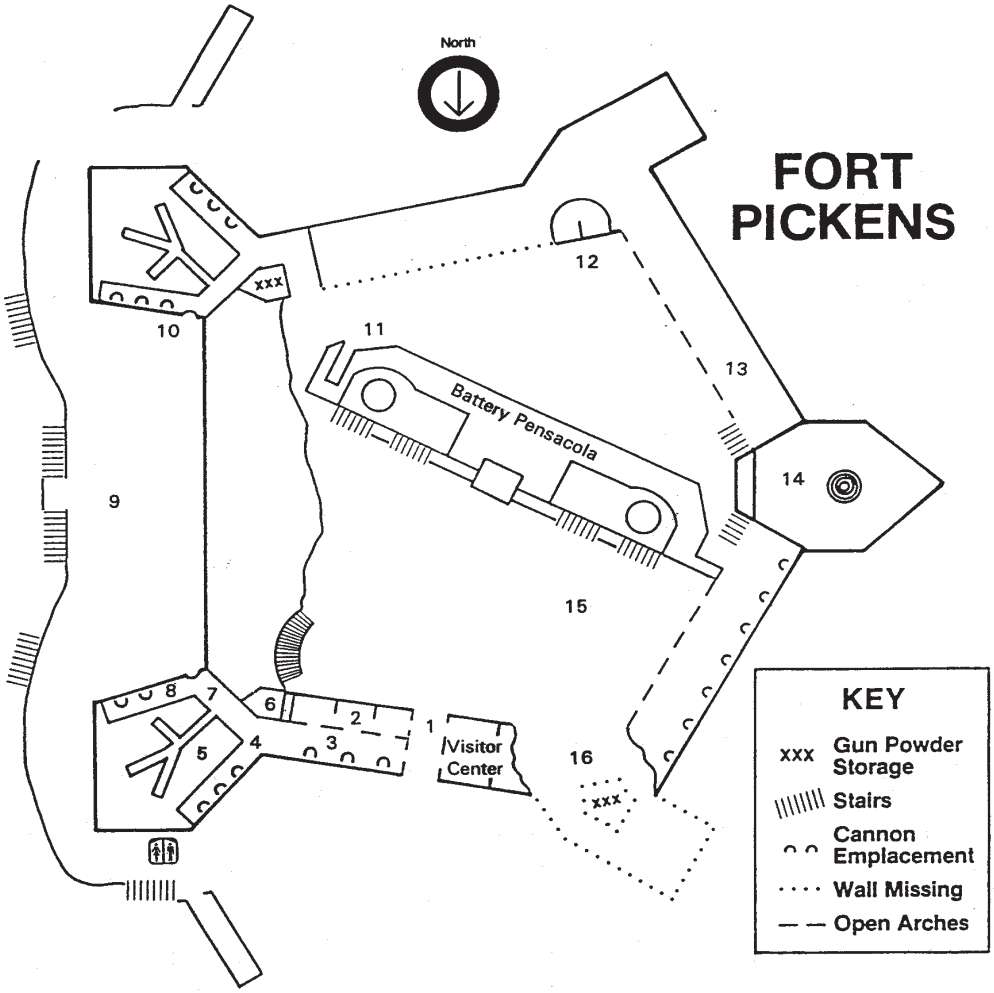
Ironically, the only real action the fort endured occurred when the country was at war with itself. Fort Pickens was one of four seacoast forts in the South that remained in Union control during the Civil War. In 1861, Union forces at Fort Pickens faced Confederates holding the mainland. The two forces came to blows in October and November of 1861. To bolster sagging defenses in north Mississippi and west Tennessee, the Confederates abandoned Pensacola. On May 12, 1862, Union troops wasted no time in hoisting "Old Glory" over the navy

Aerial View of Fort Pickens, circa 1980.

yard, Forts Barrancas and McRee. Two days later, despite a threat on his life from the mayor and people of Pensacola, Lieutenant Kaufman raised the flag over the plaza in Pensacola.

To keep up with changes in weapon technology and protect the coastline from foreign invasion, the fort underwent dramatic changes over the years. Most notable, Battery Pensacola was constructed in 1898 and covers almost half of the parade ground. Smooth bore cannon were replaced, recycled, or converted to rifled cannon. Mines were stored at Fort Pickens for deployment in Pensacola Bay.

The United States continues to struggle with the need to provide homeland defense. Each generation of Americans is presented with new threats resulting in the need for new military protection and increased security. Therefore, obsolete forts and military bases are closed and weapons are recycled to make way for modern defenses. Today, Fort Pickens represents a link between our past, our present and our future. Preserved by the American people, Fort Pickens exemplifies over a century of homeland defense from the nation's infancy through World War II.



Geronimo at San Carlos, Arizona in 1884. Although not a chief, Geronimo was a noted war leader and considered by some to be a medicine man.

Touring the Fort

Fort Pickens successfully served the country protecting the coastline for over a hundred years. The fort has undergone many changes. Yet with imagination, the layers of time can be peeled back to see its history.

1. Sallyport. Secured with heavy oak doors, the main entrance to the fort was reached by a causeway. Train tracks were later installed for moving equipment to Battery Pensacola.

2. Quarters. These plaster-lined rooms were intended for officers. Floors, doors and window sashes were wood. Fireplaces had marble mantels. These rooms served as a hospital in 1861. In 1887, Apache prisoners were housed here. Geronimo, the most famous of these, lived in identical rooms along the south wall.

These masonary walls were strong enough to support heavy cannon on top and allow space for cannon below, providing twice as many guns as earth and log forts of similar size. Notches were cut into the rear columns of the casemates in 1841 to allow room for newer and larger gun carriages.

3. Casemates. Most of the fort consisted of gun emplacements both atop and within the walls. These interior gunrooms are called casemates. Granite semicircles in the floor supported the great weight of the cast iron guns. Slots under the windows locked gun carriages into the wall and provided a pivot. Vents over the windows allowed the tremendous amounts of smoke produced by black powder ammunition to disperse. The smooth bore cannon had an effective range of about one mile. Although these casemates were modified in later years, many unaltered examples remain in the fort.

4. Mine Battery Room. In 1894 these casemates were converted to shelter electric batteries used to power a minefield in the harbor. Dampness forced relocation to the building just outside the fort in 1904. For many years this area was mistakenly identified as "Geronimo's Cell."

5. Mine Chambers. This tunnel system leads to three chambers, each designed to hold about 1,000 pounds of gunpowder. Should an enemy force gain the top of the walls, these mines would be blown as a last resort to defend the fort.

6. Powder Magazine. These windows (ventilators) open onto one of the two remaining magazines in the fort. Wood linings kept the powder dry and copper and brass hardware prevented sparks. The three magazines held 250,000 pounds of black powder, enough to supply the fort for two weeks during an attack.

The 12-inch guns of Battery Pensacola, mounted on disappearing carriages, represented the largest and most advanced weapons in the Army's arsenal in 1898. The steel barrel took over a year to manufacture and with its carriage weighed 116,000 pounds. The 1,070 pound projectiles were propelled by 275 pounds of smokeless nitrocellulose powder. The guns had an effective range of about 8 miles. This type of gun battery was made obsolete by carrier-borne aircraft and Battery Pensacola was disarmed in 1934.

7. Shelf Supports. These concrete shelf supports are believed to be for mine equipment and later held extra ammunition for the guns of Battery Pensacola.

8. Generator Room. The concrete on the floor is evidence of the power station installed here in 1903. Gas-powered generators provided electricity for searchlights and other modern equipment.

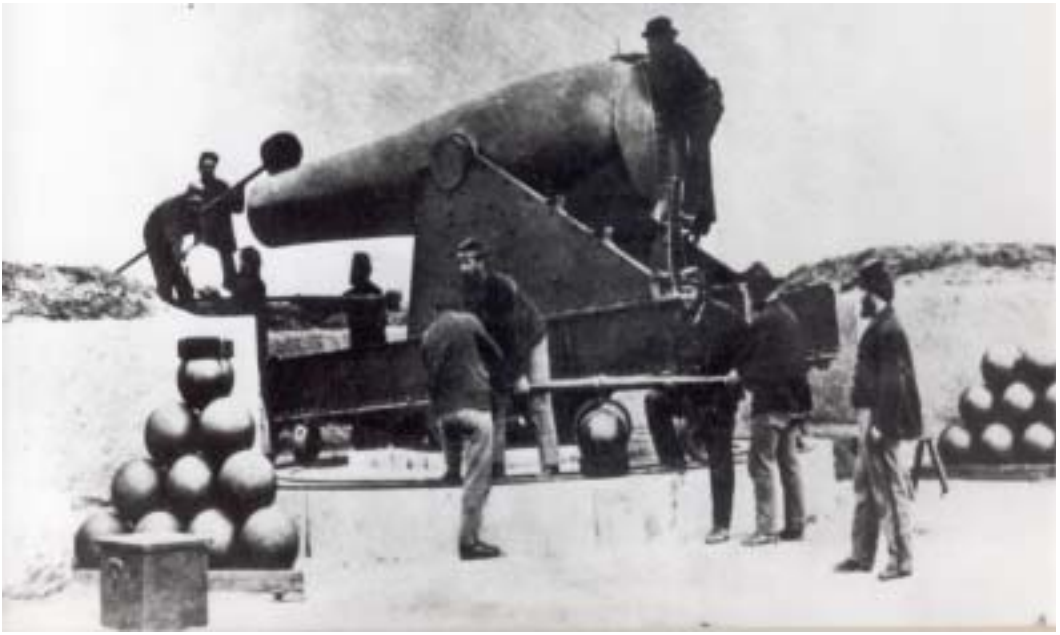
9. Counterscarp Wall and Moat. The counterscarp protected the landward face of the fort from direct artillery fire. A dry moat once surrounded the fort, but was later filled to allow easier transportation of supplies around the fort.

10. Bastion A. Projecting from the corners of the fort, bastions allowed cannon to fire down into the dry moat at invading attackers.

11. Tunnel through Battery Pensacola. Built in 1898, Battery Pensacola was constructed on the parade ground of Fort Pickens. A tunnel was placed through the battery to allow access to warehouse areas on the south side of Fort Pickens. The tunnel was closed in 1922, following the collapse of the warehouse area in 1916.

12. Cistern. Two cisterns provided the water supply for the fort. Rainwater from the arches was channeled to the cisterns, although details of the system are unknown.

13. Reverse Arch. To support the weight of the fort on sand, engineers resorted to one of the oldest of designs, the arch. 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.



The 15-inch Rodman cannon is the largest smooth bore cannon ever used by the U.S. Army. In this photo, the ten-man crew prepares to fire. Four men carry the ball with a sabot attached. (Another attached sabot is atop the stack on the left.) One man has sponged the barrel to extinguish any sparks from the previous shot, while two others handle the 50-pound powder charge in a cartridge bag, and another man below the barrel holds the ramrod. The officer at the breech is checking the aim with a removable gun sight, and the tenth man waits to bring up the next powder charge, in the box on the left.

14. Tower Bastion. At the time of construction, the western end of the island was about 150 yards beyond this corner of the fort. Today the end of the island is about 0.75 mile away. Atop this bastion is a 15-inch Rodman cannon and on the northwest wall is an 8-inch Rodman cannon. A 15-inch Rodman was installed on the Tower Bastion in 1868. The 8-inch Rodman is mounted where a similar weapon sat as late as 1901. The National Park Service mounted both cannon seen here today. The gray building beneath this bastion is a refrigeration room added about 1900.

15. Parade Ground. Seven acres of open ground in the center of the fort once provided space to quarter and drill troops. About 850 men from the 3rd Infantry and 1st and 2nd Artillery regiments camped here in September, 1861. Of these men, 77 reported sick, 3 died from disease and 3 deserted. The men suffered from scurvy for several months without fresh vegetables and from heat exhaustion due to fatigue duty (in wool uniforms) in the intense heat.

16. Bastion D. This corner was destroyed when a fire begun in warehouse areas reached a black powder magazine containing 8,000 pounds of powder. The explosion on June 20, 1899 showered debris 1.5 miles, reaching Fort Barrancas. The driveway was later added for access to Battery Pensacola.

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