

fort pulaski

The young colonel and his aide stared with disbelief and apprehension at the gaping hole in the southeast wall. Explosive shells from rifled cannon had blasted through the thick masonry and were now crashing against the walls of the northwest powder magazine. Fort Pulaski and its 385 Confederate defenders were in danger of being destroyed by their own gunpowder. Col. Charles Olmstead took the only course left him. He surrendered the fort and his command to Gen. Quincy Gillmore, U.S. Army, officially ending the era of "impregnable" masonry fortifications and verifying the superiority of the new rifled guns.

Olmstead vividly described what had happened in a letter to his wife:

Fort Pulaski
April 11th 1862

My dear Wife

I address you under circumstances of the most painful nature. Fort Pulaski has fallen and the whole garrison are prisoners. Early yesterday morning a flag of truce came over from Tybee Island conveying a demand for the surrender of the Fort. Of course I could give but one answer, that I was there to fight not to yield. We instantly made all our preparations, and at eight o'clock precisely, the enemy opened fire upon us. We returned it, slowly at first but increasing in rapidity as we got the range. It soon became evident to my mind that if the enemy continued to fire as they had begun that our walls must yield. Shot after shot . . . hit immediately about our embrasures. Some came through dismounting a gun, wounding one man very severely, and flaking off the bricks in every direction.

After fighting for two or three hours, some of our barbette guns were also rendered useless by the piles of masonry thrown upon them from the parapet. Officers and men behaved most gallantly, everyone was cool and collected. There was no shirking. The men when ordered on the parapet, went immediately with the most cheerful alacrity, though the missiles of death were flying about at the most fearful rate. Thirteen inch mortar shells, Columbiad shells, rifle shots were shrieking through the air in every direction, while the ear was deafened by the tremendous explosions that followed each other without cessation. And so the day wore on, until night brought us a little rest, which was much needed, for the men were nearly worn out. On taking a survey of the Fort after the firing had ceased my worst fears were confirmed. The angle immediately opposed to the fire of the enemy was terribly shattered and I was convinced that another day would breach it entirely. . . .

At half past eleven the enemy opened fire again and kept it up at intervals of ten or fifteen minutes during the night. We did not answer, however, until six o'clock in the morning when firing became general again and continued until about half past two o'clock in the afternoon when it was reported to me that our magazine was in danger. I found that the breach in our wall had become so alarmingly enlarged that shots from the batteries of the enemy were passing clear through and striking directly on the brickwork of the magazine. It was simply a question of a few hours as to whether we should yield or to be blown into perdition by our own powder. . . . I conferred with my officers and they united in advising me to surrender at once to avoid any further and unnecessary bloodshed. Their advice chimed with my own views, and I gave the necessary orders for a Surrender.

. . . I cannot write now all the details of our surrender. It pains me too much to think of them now, but I must tell you, darling, of the kind feeling evinced for me by my men. They crowded around me and endeavored by every means in their power to show me that they were willing to share whatever fate might be in store for me.

You can form no idea of the ruin of our South East Angle. Two casemates are completely torn to pieces, the outer wall having fallen out into the moat, while the casemates adjoining are cracked and crumbling from top to bottom. And yet to think in the midst of the severe fire which brought about this devastation, we have had but three men seriously wounded. . . .

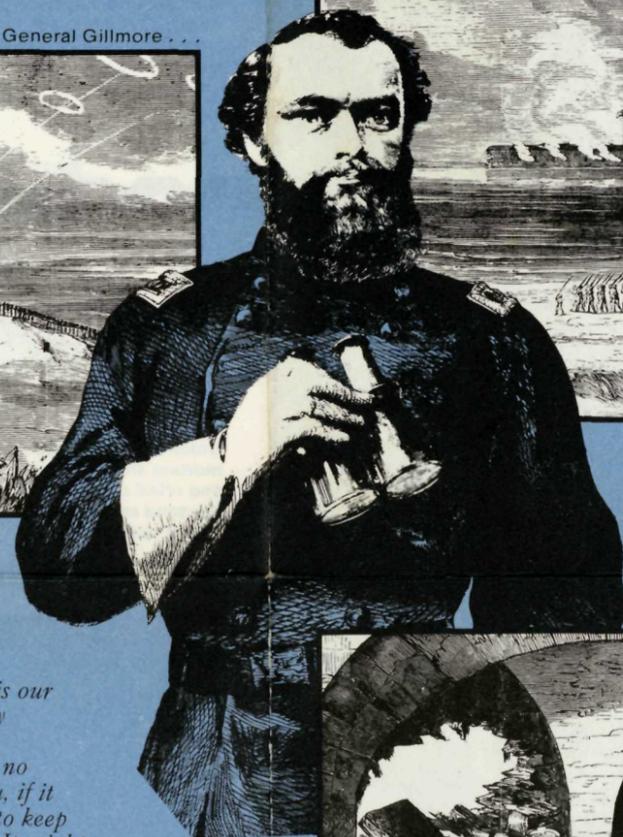
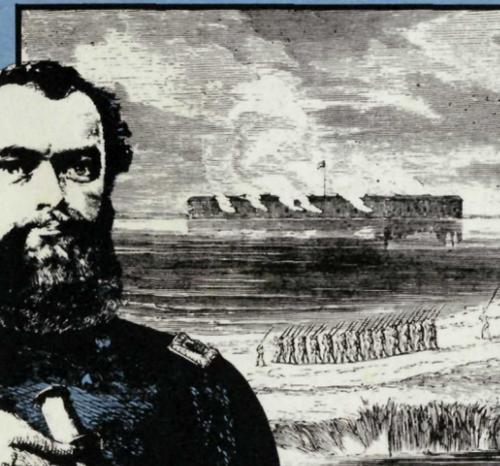
. . . I have escaped without a scratch, thanks to our ruling Providence. . . .

. . . I shall not finish this until tomorrow when I hope to be able to tell you where we are to be sent. I care very little where it be so long as I can carry with me the approval of my own conscience. I feel that I have done my duty, my whole duty, that I have been forced to yield only to superior might of metal. Guns such as have never before been brought to bear against any fortification, have overpowered me, but I trust to history to keep my name untarnished. Good night, God bless you.

Union batteries under General Gillmore . . .

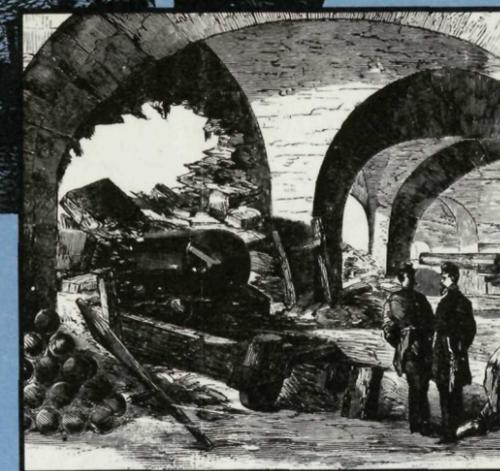


bombard Fort Pulaski.



12th. I am still in the dark as to where we will be sent, though I believe New York is our destination. . . . And now my darling, I must say good bye. Rest assured that I shall lose no opportunity of writing to you, if it is allowed. Try, dear Florie, to keep a cheerful heart in this trial. It might have been worse for us. Give a great deal of love to all the dear ones at home. I do not name them, but they all have places in my heart. Comfort my mother, and give a sweet kiss to our little one for her absent father. That God may ever bless and protect you is the earnest prayer of your affectionate husband.

—Charlie



Confederates hold out only 30 hours.

Gillmore was the hero of the day. For his boldness in using a new weapon and for the victory won, he was breveted a brigadier general.

Despite the concern he expressed to his wife, Olmstead fared quite well, too. Along with the other 384 officers and men in Pulaski's garrison, he was sent north and imprisoned at Governor's Island in New York. When he was exchanged in the fall of 1862, he resumed command of his regiment and served with distinction to the end of the Civil War.

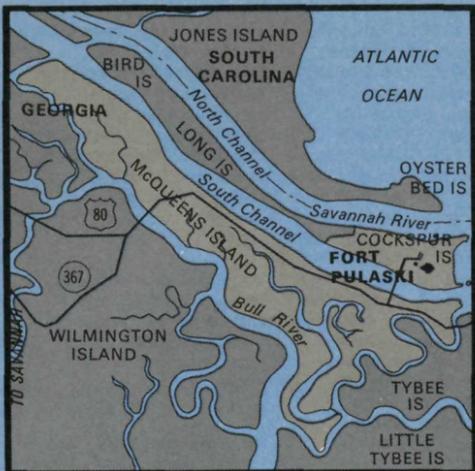
Federal troops garrisoned the fort until the war was over, when it was used to house several political prisoners. After 1880, a caretaker and lightkeeper were the fort's only occupants, and they, too, were soon removed, leaving the structure to the ever-encroaching vegetation and animal life.

In 1794 the relatively young U.S. Government built Fort Greene on Cocks spur, but it was demolished 10 years later by a hurricane. The present fort, named for the Polish count, was built as part of a coastal fortifications system adopted after the War of 1812 by President James Madison.

Gen. Simon Bernard, a military engineer formerly under Napoleon, undertook the primary design work for the structure, and the U.S. Corps of Engineers carried it out under a succession of chief engineers.

Construction began in 1829, and in that first year, Robert E. Lee, a young lieutenant fresh from West Point, was assigned to build the dikes and drainage system for the island. Lee worked on Cocks spur for 2 years (he returned 30 years later under the Confederate flag to inspect the fort's defenses).

Chief credit for completion of the fort rests with then 1st Lt. Joseph Mansfield, who worked on the structure from 1831 to 1845. By 1847, \$1 million had been spent, 18



Fort Pulaski National Monument

The park is open from 8:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. daily, except December 25, and can be reached via U.S. 80 from Savannah. It is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior; the superintendent's address is Box 98, Savannah Beach, GA 31328.

As the Nation's principal conservation agency, the Department of the Interior has responsibility for most of our nationally owned public lands and natural resources. This includes fostering the wisest use of our land and water resources, protecting our fish and wildlife, preserving the

environmental and cultural values of our national parks and historical places, and providing for the enjoyment of life through outdoor recreation. The Department assesses our energy and mineral resources and works to assure that their development is in the best interests of all our people. The Department also has a major responsibility for American Indian reservation communities and for people who live in Island Territories under U.S. administration.

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

years had passed, and 25 million bricks rested on the mud of Cockspur. The fort, said to be "as strong as the Rocky Mountains" was at last finished.

The Federal Government hardly got to use its new fort when the ungarrisoned structure was seized January 3, 1861, on the eve of the Civil War, by several detachments of Georgia troops. On the 19th, Georgia seceded from the Union, and Confederate troops hurriedly prepared the fort for the attack that was sure to come.

On November 6, ships of a Federal blockading fleet appeared in Port Royal Sound and a day later captured Fort Walker on nearby Hilton Head Island. Working from a base there, Gen. David Hunter sent Capt. Quincy Gillmore to establish artillery emplacements for the bombardment of Fort Pulaski. After hauling 36 cannon through the black, oozing mud of Tybee Island and working for 2 months at night and in silence only 1.6 kilometers (1 mile) from Pulaski's walls, they finished the job on April 9. The next day the bombardment began that was to end forever the role of the brick fort as a defense in wartime.

Some of Gillmore's cannon were experimental; unlike conventional smoothbore artillery, these cannon had spiraled, or rifled, grooves inside the barrel. When one was fired, an expansion skirt or ring on the projectile engaged the rifling in the barrel, providing a spin to the bullet-shaped shot. This spin gave the projectile increased accuracy, range, and penetration power unmatched by the spherical shot of smooth bore artillery. From about 1.6 kilometers (1 mile) shots from the rifled guns penetrated Fort Pulaski's walls, sending bricks showering into the air. With their magazine endangered and their equipment and guns shattered, the Confederates capitulated.

Life on the Islands

Originally a salt marsh, Cockspur Island is now mostly dry land because dredged materials have been deposited outside the dikes around the fort. McQueens Island, however, is mostly virgin salt marsh. Temperatures range from 7°C (20°F) in winter to 37°C (100°F) in summer.

Here you can see luxuriant, semitropical plants intermixed with those of the temperate and desert zones. Here, too, are large populations of resident and migrant birds. Mammals include marsh rabbit, raccoons, opossums, mink, and otter.

Alligators and snakes Occasionally an alligator will enter the moat when the water level drops on the rest of the island, but generally they shun people and live elsewhere.

There are many snakes in and around the fort in spring and summer, mostly the yellow rat snake—brown or black with dull white or yellow markings. **These are harmless and serve as natural mice- and rat-exterminators in the fort.** Of the many species of reptiles here, **only the eastern diamondback rattlesnake is poisonous.** Please do not tease or molest these animals—or any other wildlife.

For Your Safety

Stay off mounds and top-most walls of the fort.

Don't run on the terreplein (upper level) of the fort.

Come down when there is lightning.

Keep pets on leash or under other physical control.

Mosquitoes and horseflies are present in spring and summer; use a repellent or wear protective clothing.

Watch your step in the fort, and when walking and hiking, stay on the trails.

A Tour of the Fort

Please watch your step in and around the fort, for most of it is in its original state. There are some sections, however, that have been reconstructed or restored—the veranda over the gorge wall and the brick walk around the fort are replacements; the rooms in the gorge have been re-plastered and they also have new woodwork, and some casemate flooring has been replaced. New mortar (repointing) has been applied in many sections of the brickwork. As you tour the fort, think of what it was like when it was in active military use. During Confederate occupation, there were 385 officers and men; Federal strength reached a peak of 1,100 men. (Each side lost one man here.) Although the fort was designed for 140 cannon, Union troops installed only 60.

1. The Moat This wet ditch that completely surrounds the fort is 2 meters (7 feet) deep and varies from 10 to 14.5 meters (32 to 48 feet) in width.

2. The Demilune This huge triangle protected the rear or "gorge" wall of the fort. Until after the Civil War, it was a flat area, surrounded by a low parapet, containing out-buildings and various storage sheds. The earth-covered magazines were built in 1870 by Federal troops to modernize the fort. The earthen mounds were constructed to protect the powder underneath and the cannons that were mounted between them.

PLEASE KEEP OFF THE MOUNDS.

Terminology

Terreplein—upper level of fort with grass on it.

Parapet—wall that protects guns and gunners.

Casemate—arched gun room.

Demilune—triangular ground outside fort surrounded by moat.

Sallyport—main entrance to fort.

Portcullis—gate that drops from above to seal sallyport.

Gorge—back wall containing sallyport.

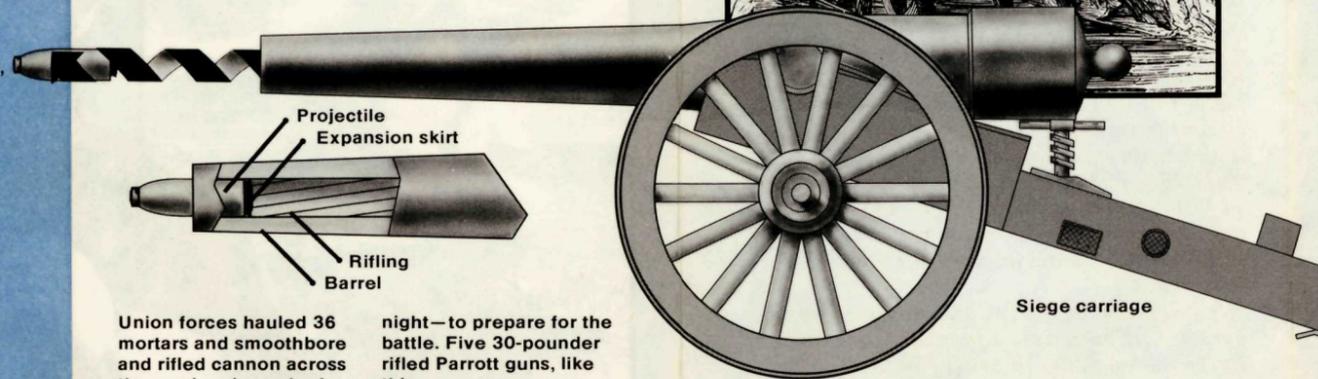
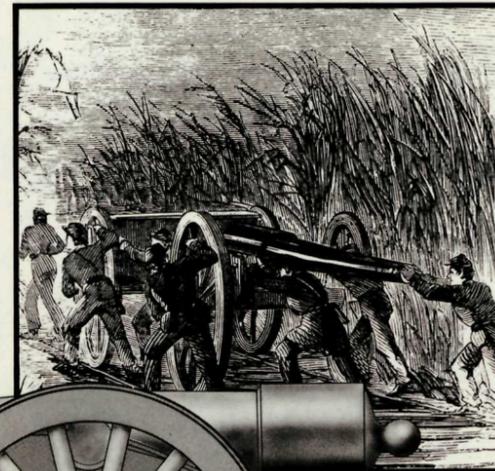
Bastion—corner of fort that protrudes from wall.

Magazine—room where gunpowder is stored.

Embrasure—gun port or window that gun shoots through.

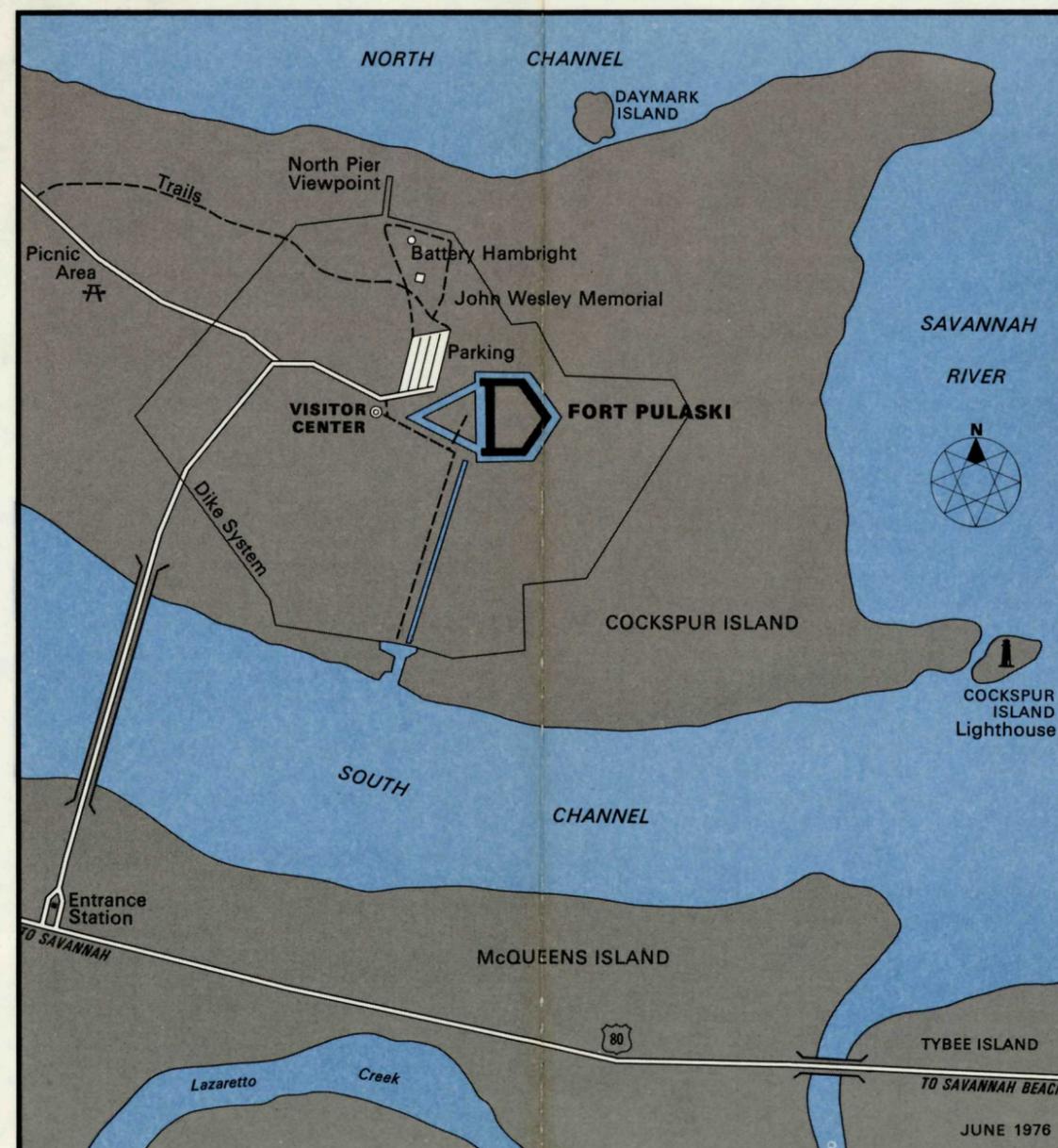
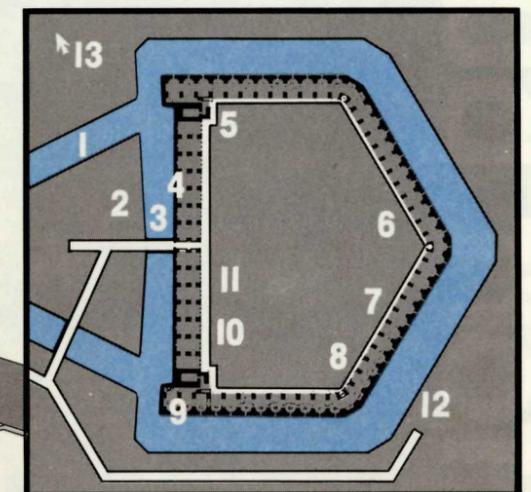
Communication arch—arch connecting one casemate to another.

Parade—parade ground enclosed by fort walls.



Union forces hauled 36 mortars and smoothbore and rifled cannon across the sand and marsh of Tybee Island—often at

night—to prepare for the battle. Five 30-pounder rifled Parrott guns, like this one, were among them.



5. The Northwest Magazine On the morning of April 11, 1862, Union artillery breached the southeast angle and sent shells crashing into the walls and roof of this magazine which contained 18,160 kilograms (40,000 pounds) of gunpowder. Rather than be blown up by their own powder, the garrison surrendered. The magazine was constructed entirely out of wood, and copper nails were used and vent screens were included to eliminate accidental sparks. The walls are roughly 1.2 meters (4 feet) thicker than the rest of the walls in the fort.

6. Confederate Defense System The Confederate defenders of the fort built earthen traverses between the guns and over the magazine and dug ditches and pits in the parade ground to catch rolling cannon shot. They also erected a heavy timber blindage to cover the interior perimeter of the fort as a protection against shell fragments.

7. The Prison During the winter of 1864, the prison held Confederate officers under miserable conditions. After the war, several political prisoners were held here. The prison originally extended through the northeast and southeast galleries.

8. The Breach The 2.3-meter (7.5-foot) thick walls at this angle were demolished by Union rifled artillery on April 10-11, 1862, forcing the Confederates to surrender the fort. The walls were repaired within 6 weeks by troops of the Union Army.

9. Southwest Bastion This bastion, which burned in an 1895 fire, has been left unrestored to show various construction details of the fort. Brick arches under the terreplein carry weight to counter-arches in the floor which, in turn, are supported by a timber grillage and pilings driven 21.3 meters (70 feet) into the mud of Cockspur.

10. Cistern Room The cistern exposed here is one of ten that were used to store freshwater. Rain filtered through the sod on the terreplein, ran down lead pipes in brick piers and thence to the tanks. The whole system could hold more than 757,000 liters (200,000 gallons).

11. Exhibits and Restrooms This section of the gorge wall contains various exhibits on soldier life and artillery in the Civil War.

12. Damaged Wall The craters made by Union artillery pock the south and southeast walls. Rifled cannon shot fired from Tybee Island, 1.6 kilometers (1 mile) to the southeast, penetrated the walls 50-60 centimeters (20-25 inches). Some of the 5,275 shots fired can still be seen in the wall.

13. Trails Along these trails, you can see the variety of plants and animal life on the island. A short distance from the fort is a monument to John Wesley, founder of Methodism, who landed in America in 1736 at Cockspur.

If you have any questions or need assistance in any way while visiting the park, please don't hesitate to ask us. Enjoy your visit!