

Fort Pulaski

Fort Pulaski National Monument
Georgia

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



In the second quarter of the 19th century, U.S. military engineers built Fort Pulaski on marshy Cockspar Island to guard the river approaches to Savannah, Ga. Named for Count Casimir Pulaski, the Polish hero of the American Revolution who lost his life in the unsuccessful siege of Savannah in 1779, it was designed by Gen. Simon Bernard, a distinguished French military engineer, as part of a coastal fortification system adopted by President James Madison after the War of 1812. Construction began in 1829 and required \$1 million, 25 million bricks, and 18 years of toil to finish. Its admirers (and there were many) considered it invincible and "as strong as the Rocky Mountains." By the end of 1860, however, its armament was still not completed and it was not yet garrisoned. As it turned out, before United States troops could occupy the fort, they had to conquer it.

On January 3, 1861, two weeks after South Carolina seceded from the Union and one week after Federal troops occupied Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor, Georgia Gov. Joseph E. Brown ordered state militia to seize Fort Pulaski. At this time Savannah was a city of about 20,000 inhabitants and a rich seaport trading in cotton, naval stores, and timber. Though

many disagreed on the wisdom of seizing the Federal fort, people of all classes joined in preparations for its defense following the occupation. After Georgia seceded on January 19, 1861, the state transferred Fort Pulaski to the Confederate States of America.

By the end of April 1861, 11 Southern states had left the Union and were at war with the United States. Before the end of the summer, President Abraham Lincoln ordered the U.S. Navy to blockade Southern ports. As the blockade tightened it strangled the Confederate economy. On November 7, 1861, a combined Army and Navy expedition struck at Port Royal Sound, S.C., about 15 miles north of Fort Pulaski. Confederate troops fled as Federal warships bombarded Forts Walker and Beauregard, allowing Union forces to land unopposed on Hilton Head Island. From this beachhead, the Federals established a base for operations against Fort Pulaski and the whole southern Atlantic Coast.

On November 10, intimidated by the Federal presence at Hilton Head, the Confederates abandoned Tybee Island at the mouth of the Savannah, unknowingly giving the enemy the only site from which Fort Pulaski could

be taken. The Federals acted quickly to take advantage of the break. Early in December they cut the fort's communications with the mainland, then moved troops to Tybee Island to prepare for siege operations.

Engineer Capt. Quincy A. Gillmore, who assumed command of all troops on Tybee Island in February 1862, believed that an overwhelming bombardment would force the Confederates to give up the fort. Accordingly, he erected 11 artillery batteries containing 36 guns and mortars along the northwest shore of Tybee Island. On April 10, after the Confederates refused Gillmore's formal demand to surrender, the Federals opened fire. The Confederates were not particularly alarmed; the Union guns were a mile away, more than twice the effective range for heavy ordnance of that day. But what the fort's garrison did not know was that the Federal armament included 10 new experimental rifled cannons, whose projectiles began to bore through Pulaski's walls with shattering effect. By noon of the second day the bombardment had opened wide gaps in the southeast angle, and explosive shells, passing through the holes and over the walls, threatened the main powder magazine. Impressed by the hopelessness of the situation and concerned about the lives of his men, the

Confederate commander, Col. Charles H. Olmstead, surrendered only 30 hours after the bombardment began.

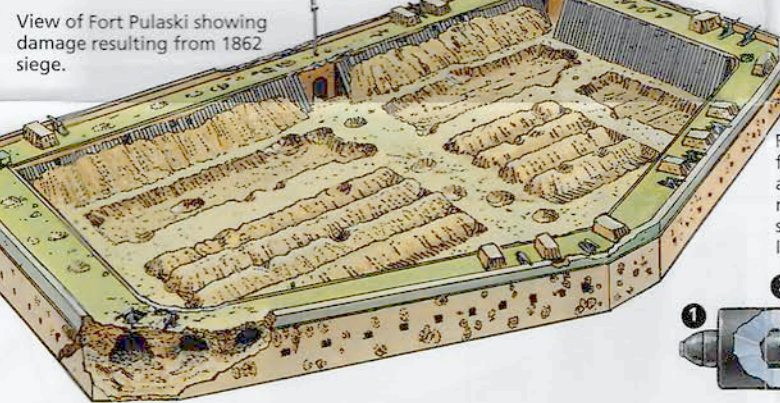
Gillmore was the hero of the day. For his boldness in using a new weapon and for the victory won, he was breveted a brigadier general. Olmstead, along with the other 384 officers and men in Pulaski's garrison, was sent north and imprisoned at Governor's Island in New York. When he was exchanged in the autumn of 1862, he resumed command of his regiment and served with distinction for the remainder of the Civil War. Federal troops garrisoned Fort Pulaski until war's end, when it was used to house several political prisoners. After 1880 a caretaker and lighthouse keeper were the fort's only occupants. They too were soon removed, leaving the place to the ever-encroaching vegetation and animal life. The island was made a national monument in 1924; restoration of the fort began in earnest about 1933. Today the fort serves not only as a memorial to the valor and dedication of those connected with its construction, bombardment, and defense, but in a larger sense as a history lesson on the elusiveness of invincibility.

The End of an Era

The quick fall of Fort Pulaski surprised and shocked the world. When the Civil War began, Pulaski ranked as one of the "most spectacular harbor defense structures" in the United States. Many considered the fort's 7½-foot solid brick walls backed with massive masonry piers unbreachable, including U.S. Chief of Engineers Joseph G. Totten. "You might as well bombard the Rocky Mountains," was how he summed it up. All previous military experience had taught that beyond 700 yards smoothbore cannons and mortars would have little chance to break through heavy masonry walls; beyond 1,000 yards no chance at all. And since there was no firm ground on which siege batteries could be erected nearer than Tybee Island, a mile or more away, Pulaski's defenders felt understandably secure. Even Gen. Robert E. Lee, who as a second lieutenant had worked on the island's drainage system, told Colonel Olmstead that Federal gunners on Tybee Island could "make it pretty warm for you here with shells, but they cannot breach your walls at that distance." Gillmore's rifled guns proved the fallacy of that judgment. "The result of this bombardment," wrote one Union officer, "must cause . . . a change in the construction of fortifications as radical as that foreshadowed in naval architecture by the conflict between the Monitor and Merrimac. No works of stone or brick can resist the impact of rifled artillery of heavy calibre." The strategy that heretofore had guided military leaders had to be revised to meet the threat of this new weapon of war. Fort Pulaski, because of the consequent changes, became an interesting relic of a bygone era.



The 11 Union batteries used in the reduction of Fort Pulaski are pinpointed on this map based on Captain Gillmore's plan of operations.



Col. Charles H. Olmstead
His decision to surrender Fort Pulaski haunted him for decades. "We were absolutely isolated," he later wrote, "beyond any possibility of help from the Confederate Authorities, and I did not feel warranted in exposing the garrison to the hazard



of the blowing up of our main magazine—a danger which had just been proved well within the limits of probability. . . . There are times when a soldier must hold his position 'to the last extremity,' which means extermination, but this was not one of them. . . . That



Quincy A. Gillmore His conduct at Fort Pulaski won him promotion to brigadier general.



Union mortar battery on Tybee Island bombards Fort Pulaski. These weapons, though effective at

short ranges, could hardly reach the fort and inflicted little or no damage to the walls. Gillmore's rifled

cannon, however, caused massive damage, marks of which can still be seen on the fort's walls.



Interior view of Pulaski's southeast casemates showing the breach made by the Federal batteries

that helped bring about the surrender of the fort.

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

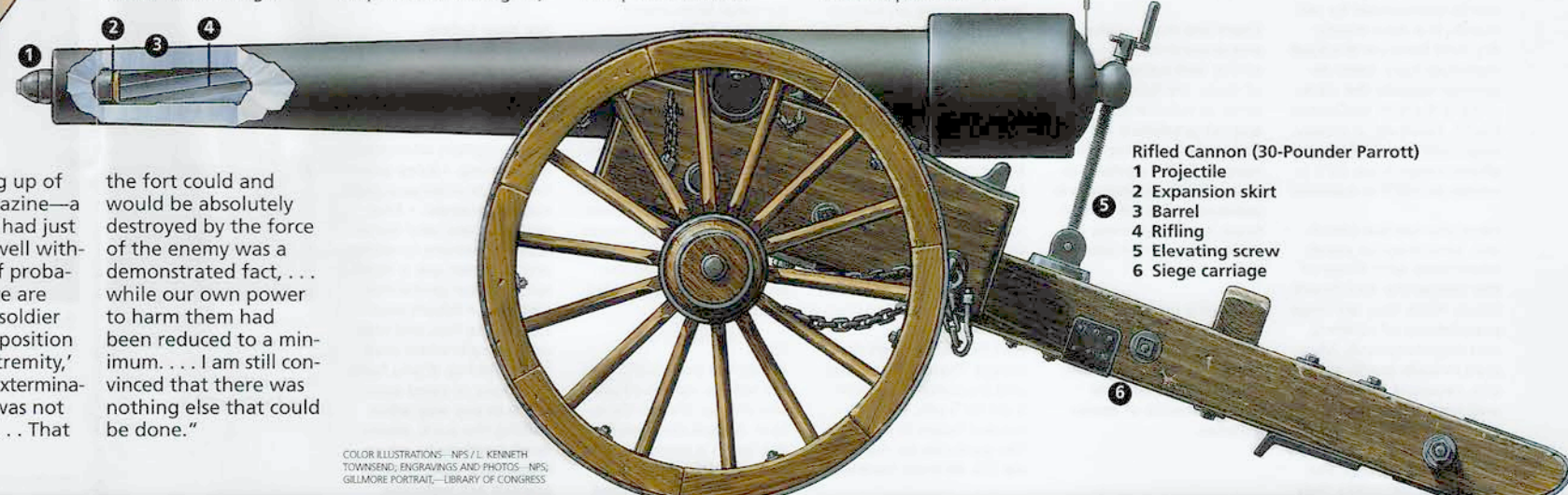
and in virtual silence—to prepare for the siege of Fort Pulaski. Five of the 10 rifled cannon used against the fort were 30-pounder Parrott guns,

like the one shown below, which had an effective range of 8,453 yards. Rifled cannon, unlike conventional smooth-bore artillery, had spiraled or rifled

grooves inside the barrel. An expansion skirt or ring on the projectile engaged the rifling in the barrel, providing a spin to the bullet-shaped shell. This

spin gave the projectile increased accuracy, range, and penetration power unmatched by the spherical shot of smoothbore

guns. Thus even from a distance of about one mile, shots from the rifled guns penetrated Fort Pulaski's walls with relative ease.



Rifled Cannon (30-Pounder Parrott)
1 Projectile
2 Expansion skirt
3 Barrel
4 Rifling
5 Elevating screw
6 Siege carriage

COLOR ILLUSTRATIONS—NPS/L. KENNETH TOWNSEND; ENGRAVINGS AND PHOTOS—NPS; GILLMORE PORTRAIT—LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



Third System Forts
Fort Pulaski belonged to what is known as the Third System of coastal fortifications, developed during the first half of the 19th century and characterized by greater structural durability than earlier works. Nearly all of the 30-plus

Third System forts built after 1816 still exist. The locations of the principal works along the Atlantic and Gulf coasts on the eve of war are shown at left.

A Guide to Fort Pulaski

1 Moat

This wet ditch that completely surrounds the fort is seven feet deep and from 32 to 48 feet wide. The water was brought through a canal from the Savannah River and controlled by tide gates. A variety of small marine life inhabits the moat.

2 Demilune

This huge triangular piece of land, bordered on all sides by the moat, protected the rear or gorge wall of the fort. During the Civil War, this area was flat with a surrounding parapet and contained outbuildings and various storage sheds. The large earthen mounds, built after the war, overlay four powder magazines and passageways to several gun emplacements.

3 Drawbridge

A part of the fort's overall defense, the drawbridge is to make forced entry difficult. As it is raised, a strong wooden grille, called the portcullis, drops through the granite lintel overhead; bolt-studded doors are closed behind that. An inclined granite walk leads between two rows of rifle slits, past another set of doors, and into the fort.

4 Gorge Wall

This, the rear section of the fort, contains the sally port, or fort entrance. Officers lived in most of the rooms here. Today several are furnished to represent various aspects of life at the fort.

5 Northwest Magazine

On the morning of April 11, 1862, Union artillery projectiles breached the southeast angle and crashed into the walls and roof of this magazine containing 40,000 pounds of gunpowder. Rather than be blown up by their own gunpowder, the garrison surrendered. The walls of the magazine are from 12 to 15 feet thick, or roughly four feet thicker than the rest of the walls in the fort.

6 Confederate Defense System

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 (splinter-proof shelter) to cover the interior perimeter of the fort to protect against shell fragments.

7 Prison

During the winter of 1864, the northeast, southeast, and part of the south casemates were used as a military prison holding Confederate officers under miserable conditions. After the war, several political prisoners were held here.

8 The Breach

The 7½-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 six weeks after the surrender by troops of the 48th New York Volunteers.

9 Southwest Bastion

This bastion, which has been left unrestored to show various construction details of the fort. Brick arches under the terreplein (the upper level upon which the cannons are mounted) carry weight to counter-arches in the floor which, in turn, are supported by a timber grillage and piling driven 70 feet into the mud of Cockspar Island.

10 Surrender Room

These were the quarters of the Confederate commanding officer, Col. Charles Olmstead. In this room on April 11, 1862, Olmstead surrendered Fort Pulaski to Union forces after some 30 hours of bombardment.

11 Cistern Room and Restrooms

The cistern exposed here is one of 10 that were used to store fresh water. 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 200,000 gallons.

12 Damaged Wall

The craters made by Union artillery projectiles pock the south and southeast walls. Rifled cannon shot fired from Tybee Island penetrated the walls 20 to 25 inches. Some of the 5,275 shots fired can still be seen in the wall.



Visitor Center

ILLUSTRATION—NPS / L. KEENE THOMPSON

Things You Should Know

Cockspar Island was originally a series of small hammocks surrounded by salt marsh. It 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 20°F in winter to 100°F in summer.

Here you can see luxuriant, semi-tropical plants intermixed with those of the temperate and desert zones. Here, too, are large populations of resident and migratory birds. Mammals include marsh rabbits, raccoons, opossums, and mink. 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. Most of these are harmless and serve as natural mice and rat predators. 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.

Alcohol is not permitted within the historic dike system. **Open containers of alcohol are prohibited within the passenger compartments of motor vehicles.**

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. (Each side lost one man here.) The fort was designed for 140

cannon, but Union troops installed only 60.

Please watch your step in and around the fort, for most of it is in its original state. Some sections, like the veranda over the

gorge wall and the brick walk around the fort, have been rebuilt; others, like the rooms in the gorge, have been restored. New

mortar (repointing) has been applied to many parts of the brick work.

More Information
Fort Pulaski
National Monument
P.O. Box 30757
Savannah, GA 31410
912-786-5787
www.nps.gov/fopu

Audio Stations
You can hear brief taped messages about Fort Pulaski at many locations on the tour described above. Look for small gray boxes mounted on the walls. Push the button on the box to hear the recorded message.

Trails
Along the park trails, you can see the variety of plant 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 Cockspar Island.

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 from the terreplein when there is lightning. • Keep pets leashed or otherwise physically restrained. • Mosquitoes, gnats, and horseflies are present in spring and summer; use a repellent or wear protective clothing. • Watch your step in the fort and stay on the trails when walking or hiking. If you have questions or need assistance in any way while visiting the park, please don't hesitate to ask us. Enjoy your visit. Service animals are welcome.



Cannon mounted in the northwest bastion, like the bronze howitzer shown here, helped to protect the fort's entrance.



This view along Pulaski's exterior gorge wall shows part of the moat and the fort's entrance and drawbridge.

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