

In Defense of a Queen, 1800-1870

by Robert Warner

In 1718, this beautiful city of New Orleans (AWR-lee-unz) was founded. For more than 200 years it has served as a very important link for commerce between the Mississippi River and the Atlantic Ocean. Because of its beauty and charm, it has been called the Queen City of the South.

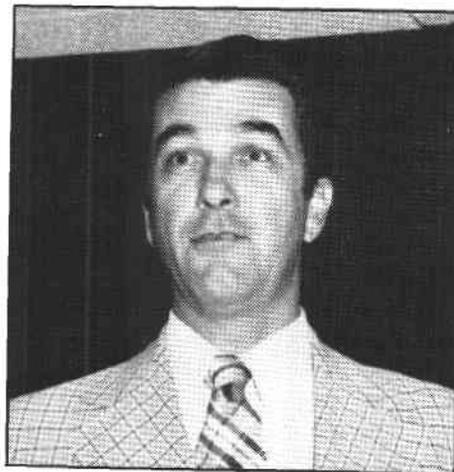
Protection of and defenses for this Queen City started in the form of entrenchments, picket revetments, and enclosed ramparts. These defenses were set around the city in a manner so as to protect its people from Indian uprisings and insurrections in neighboring parishes. At this time there were only three entrances and exits to the city: The Bayou Road, The Tchoupitoulas, and the river road.

THE LINES OF DEFENSE AS OF 1800-1820

Fort St. Charles, at the foot of Esplanade St., was one of the larger bastions which stood at the four corners of the Carré. The others were Forts St. Louis, Ferdinand, and Burgundy. All but St. Charles were demolished or abandoned by 1809. St. Charles was finally dismantled in 1821 and nothing remains of these fortifications. Another of the earliest in the area that still has any remains showing is Old Spanish Fort. This fort dates back to the 1700s and stands on the site where Bienville landed in the early 1700s. It was constructed mainly of earthen works and timber by the Spanish. In 1808 considerable amount of brick work was added to the old site and the name later changed to Fort St. John. It is located right at the mouth of Bayou St. John and Lake Pontchartrain. It now lies in ruins with very little left to see. Fort St. Leon was located on the West bank of the river at English Turn. It consisted mainly of a battery armed with nine guns, mostly 18 pounders, and a barracks. Fort Petite Coquille at the Rigolets guarded the entrance to Lake Pontchartrain. It was thought that this fortification would play a big roll in the War of 1812 and General Jackson sent word to "defend the fort to the last extreme. If you can't hold out, spike your guns and blowup the fort." Its strength was never tested, since the British attacked at Chalmette instead.

Fort St. Phillip, located approximately 70 miles south of the city on the East bank of the river, was important. It was originally built in 1795 and later remodelled and refortified under the supervision of Andrew Jackson in 1814. It covered some 1145 acres. Fort St. Phillip came under attack in 1815 by the British in their efforts to capture New Orleans. At the time it was garrisoned with 365 men under the command of Major Walter Overton. They withstood the bombarding attack of Admiral Cochrane, his 2400 troops, and five ships for a full nine days and repelled them. At the time the fort was armed with 28 - 24 pounders, 2 - 32 pounders, several mortars, and muskets. The British had really underestimated the defenses and thought it would be a walkover.

The War of 1812 saw General Andrew Jackson with 5679 troops and the British with 14,450 troops. This didn't necessarily count volunteers. When the fighting was over,



Jackson's losses were 333 attributed directly to the fighting while the British losses were put at a figure in excess of 2600 men. We are all somewhat familiar with the battle at Chalmette, just a brief review as a refresher. General Jackson had assembled a fairly good army of fighting men even though their number was small. He had enlisted the help of some free Negroes, Jean Lafitte and his pirates, as well as a group of riflemen from Kentucky and Tennessee. He distributed his troops about so as to guard the most likely routes that the British might take. A scout informed him that the attack at Fort St. Phillip had failed and that instead of attacking through Lake Pontchartrain as expected, Packenham was trying to sneak in by way of Bayou Bienvenue. This was not a good choice by the British, since this route was extremely marshy and wild. They lost a lot of men and equipment in their attempt. On that cold January morning when the British came marching up in close column, they found Jackson waiting with artillery and his sharpshooting riflemen. The results of what happened then are recorded history. The British suffered very heavy losses while the American losses were light.

In 1814 General Jackson had issued orders for the construction of another fortification on the site of old Fort Bourbon, across the river from St. Phillip. This fortification was later named Fort Jackson in his honor.

The Federal government decided that, due to the invasion of our shores by the British in the War of 1812, there was need for a coastal defense system. This system was to consist of a series of splendid brick forts, some of which still ring our coastlines. Quite a number of these forts were built along the Gulf coast and in particular around New Orleans. Fortification of the Mississippi Delta was very important because it controlled access to the whole Mississippi Valley. During the time after the War of 1812 and before the Civil War, no less than nine forts were begun in Louisiana.



THE LINES OF DEFENSE AS OF 1820-1850

In 1819 Fort Pike, named after Brigadier General Zebulon Pike, was begun at the Rigolets just a few hundred yards from the remains of old Fort Petite Coquille. This fortification covered an entire section of land with some 125 acres in the fort itself. Fort Pike was constructed in a triangular shape having curved curtain walls with three pointed bastions. The walls ranged in thickness from 4 feet to 18 feet in some areas. It was completed in 1828 at a cost of \$635,000. A second story was added in 1850. It was armed with 39 cannons and 6 mortars having a range of up to three miles. There were 24 - 32 pounders and 15 - 24 pounders mounted in casemate and barbette. The mortars were 13 inch and 10 inch types.

Fort Wood (renamed Macomb in 1851) was constructed during the same period of time, by the same company, on the Chef Mentuer. It was constructed on the same pattern as Pike and covered some 1364.71 acres. For some reason it only cost \$360,000 to build and it is still standing, although in bad repair.

The period between 1815 and 1822 saw the beginning of construction work on Fort Jackson. It was a modern brick and masonry structure in the shape of a five pointed star with heavy bomb proofs. It covered an area of 557.6 acres and cost \$554,500 to build. This fort was to see some heavy action later on. Because of the route the British had used in the battle at Chalmette, it was decided that a fortification should be built on Bayou Bienvenue. In 1826 Battery Bienvenue was constructed at the intersection of Bayous Bienvenue and Mazant. These bayous led from Lake Borgne to within a few miles east of New Orleans. This small battery covered a rather large area, some 934.7 acres, according to government records. Although it was garrisoned and armed during the Civil War, history seems to have past it by, since it never fired a shot in anger. It was constructed of earth and brick works with a moat surrounding it. This battery is now in private hands.

Fort St. Phillip was reconstructed in 1826. In an official report, Major Enoch Humphrey, Commanding Officer writes: "Fort is in bad condition. The platforms are entirely rotten and broken to pieces. The gun carriages are rotten and entirely unfit for service. The gates of the fort are out of repair and bridges falling down. The quarters of the officers and troops are old and badly constructed. It is difficult for the soldiers to keep accoutrements from getting wet whenever it rains. The powder in the magazine is more or less damaged. The garden has been destroyed by salt water, but provisions have generally been good with just a few exceptions. We have no tailor to repair or alter uniforms, which are of the old type. Muskets and accoutrements are very old and many unfit for service."

In 1834, surveys were made and construction was started on Fort Livingston, on Grande Terre Island to fortify Barataria Bay. The site chosen was formerly occupied by Jean Lafitte and his pirate band. Lafitte had since moved on to the Western Gulf area. The fort was named after Edward Livingston, who served as Secretary of State under Andrew Jackson. This fort covered 126.16 acres and was in the shape of a four sided trapeziform surrounded by a moat. Its construction was of cemented shell and brick, trimmed with granite. The work continued off and on for many years and it was never fully completed, although it was garrisoned at various times. Later dur-



ing the Civil War it was armed with a rifled 32 pounder, an 8 inch Columbiad, 7 - 24 pounders, 4 - 12 pounders and 2 howitzers.

A lesser fortification that was constructed in 1829 to prevent access to New Orleans by way of Bayou Dupre, was the Martello Tower, also known as Dupre Tower. It is now in private hands and used as a fishing camp. Originally built on land, it now stands in the bay due to the shore line retreating at approximately five feet per year. No mention was found as to how or if it was ever manned or armed.

THE LINES OF DEFENSE AS OF 1850-1870

Fort Beauregard in St. Bernard Parish was started in 1856 near Shell Beach on Lake Borgne. It was never completed, but is important because it is the first example of the use of steel I-beams and tie rods for strength. It was also of very unusual architectural design. Like Dupre Tower, it was built on land, but is now almost completely surrounded by water.

Forts Pike and Macomb were manned and armed continuously in some form from the time they were built in 1828 until around 1867. They both were captured and re-captured by the Confederate and Union forces without action. During war time they each had approximately 400 men, while peace saw 80 men or less on duty.

During the early 1860s, both Fort Jackson and Fort St. Phillip were heavily armed and manned. Both received heavy action when Admiral Farragut made his run for New Orleans. Fort Jackson had been reinforced and more armament added. This fort sat back 100 yards from the river with casemates rising above the surrounding area. It had 42 heavy guns mounted in barbette and 24 in casemates. In addition, a water battery was constructed on the down river side with 8 guns. All vulnerable parts were sandbagged 5-6 feet deep. The ammunition citadel, constructed of reinforced masonry, stood in the center of the works.

Of the guns in barbette, two were 10 inch Columbiads, three were 8 inch Columbiads, and one was a 7 inch rifle. In addition there were two 8 inch mortars, six 42 pounder, fifteen 32 pounders, eleven 24 pounders, one 8 inch howitzer, and one 7¾ inch howitzer. On the water battery, there was one 10 inch Columbiad, two 8 inch Columbiads, two 32 pound rifled guns, and one 10 inch Sea Coast mortar, which presented a formidable defense down river of the fort. It was garrisoned by approximately 600 men under the immediate command of Lt. Col. Edward Higgins.

St. Phillip on the East bank of the river also was very formidable. It, however, was an older type fort with large open areas without casements. Its walls were built of stone and brick covered with sod. It mounted its 52 guns in barbette and had a good command of the river both up and down. The 52 gun armament was broken down as follows: five 8 inch Columbiads, six 42 pounders, nine 32 pounders, twenty-two 24 pounder field howitzers, one 12 pounder, one 6 pounder, four 10 inch Sea Coast mortars, one 13 inch Sea Coast mortar, and one 8 inch mortar. It was garrisoned by approximately 600 men.

These forts were put to the test on April 18, 1862, when Admiral David Farragut and Admiral David Porter began bombarding them with 13 inch mortars from a mortar flotilla anchored just down river. Fort Jackson received the majority of the attention, taking some 8,120 rounds of mortar fire and



bombs during the five day attack. In spite of this bombardment, the forts didn't yield. Then on the morning of April 24, just prior to dawn, Farragut made his daring run on the blockade. Although under heavy fire from both the forts and Confederate naval vessels, he was able to get past the two forts and sail up the river to take New Orleans. Admiral Porter continued to attack Jackson and St. Phillip, which finally fell on May 2, 1862. A total of over 25,000 rounds of cannon and mortar shot were fired at and by the two forts.

A post-attack survey by the U.S. Government showed Fort St. Phillip's earthen works still intact, but the inner battery, parade ground, and covered ways all sustained very heavy damage. Fort Jackson was naturally more heavily damaged. The survey reads: "the drawbridge across the moat, the hot shot furnaces, and the fresh water cisterns were all destroyed. All the platforms for pitching tents were destroyed. The floors of the casemates were flooded, and all were cracked with masses of brick dislodged. The outer wall was cracked from top to bottom. The citadel was totally destroyed by fire."

In one of the last Civil War actions in the area, Fort St. John, under General Randall Gibson, defended against the Federals in February 1865. From this point on none of these area forts were engaged in significant action. Fort Macomb was abandoned on August 15, 1866, while Fort Pike was not abandoned until July 7, 1871, although records show a skeleton force on hand until October 10, 1890. The remains of these two forts can be visited by driving out US Highway 90 east approximately 23 miles. Fort Pike has been turned into a state park and has a small museum in the compound. Fort Macomb lies in ruins

and in the midst of litigation due to some developers attempting to turn it into a marina. Fort Livingston was abandoned and its guns dismantled in 1872. It presently lies in ruins, having been badly battered by hurricanes and the elements. You can still see what is left from the east end of Grand Isle or by floatplane. Batterie Bienvenue is in private hands and although badly run down and overgrown, it still retains its guns and some buildings. In the early 1960s, some vandals attempted to steal one of the guns, but due to its size and extremely heavy weight, the piece was lost in the soft marsh just in front of the wall. The Batterie also can be seen only by boat or floatplane. The Martello Tower and Fort Beauregard are accessible only by boat or floatplane. The remains of Fort St. John can be seen by driving out to the lake front at Bayou St. John. Whatever is left of Fort St. Leon is presently on restricted U.S. Government property, so I don't think there is any way to get to it easily. Fort Jackson, though reopened and reclosed several times until 1920, has been turned into a park and historical tourist attraction. It can be seen by driving south on La. Highway 23, just past Buras. Fort St. Phillip, just across the river, was regarrisoned several times before it was finally abandoned in 1918. It saw brief use in the early 1950s as a prison for Freedom Marchers who tried to make trouble. It is totally overgrown and can be seen only by boat or floatplane.

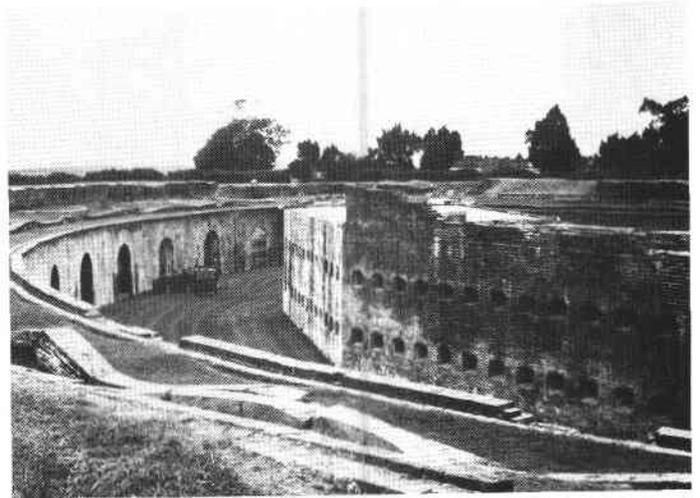
This discussion is in no way meant to be taken as the gospel, but is the facts as I found them. I hope you all have found it to be informative and perhaps even entertaining.

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- Film credits to Paul Putty, Dallas, Texas, and *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*, by Johnson and Buel.
- Special thanks to Baroid Division of NL Industries for the generous loan of a floatplane to visit all these sites for pictures.



Cannon at Batterie Bienvenue



Interior of Ft. Pike today