

HISTORY OF SHIP ISLAND

by

Ann Christensen, Park Aid, 1973
(Revised 1974)

Long before colonization of the Gulf Coast, Ship Island and all neighboring islands were frequented by pirates who raided the gold-laden Spanish galleons sailing in the Gulf of Mexico. In 1699, Pierre le Moyne d'Iberville, a French explorer, sailed into the area and landed at Ship Island. This was the beginning of a new phase of American exploration and colonization.

d'Iberville set anchor in the deep water off the island and went ashore, by shallow-keel longboat, to the site of the present-day city of Ocean Springs. His younger brother, Bienville, accompanied him and began the first permanent settlement on the coast. This was Fort Maurepas, built in the spring of 1699. d'Iberville sailed west from Ship Island exploring as far north as the present site of Baton Rouge on the Mississippi River. He laid claim to the entire area in the name of France and then returned to Europe from Ship Island in May of 1699. Bienville remained second-in-command of the young French settlement.

Several return trips were made to the coast during the early 1700's with supplies and additional colonists. Bienville moved the settlement to Mobile in 1702 and then to Biloxi in 1720, where it remained as the capital of the Louisiana Territory until 1722.

Ship Island remained vital during the entire colonization of the Mississippi-Louisiana area. All colonists entering this region via the Gulf of Mexico had to land at Ship Island prior to arrival on the mainland. The deep-draft sailing vessels which carried them were unable to get ashore due to the shallow waters of the Mississippi Sound. Therefore, it was necessary to remain in the deep water surrounding the island and then transfer to longboats. Many colonists died of disease and hunger on the island because they were unable to gain passage on a boat going ashore and even those successful in getting ashore found conditions to be little better. Colonists had come expecting to find great wealth in gold and silver. Instead they found mosquitoes, disease and starvation. Only the hardest survived to insure the future of the settlement.

As the population grew, so did commercial trade. Ship Island sheltered a bustling harbor for ships transferring their cargo to and from smaller boats. In 1763, after their defeat in the Seven Years War, the French lost the area to the English, who in turn, lost it to the Spanish after the American Revolution. The island officially became part of the United States when it was annexed in 1810.

Ship Island came into the foreground once again during the War of 1812 when Vice Admiral Sir Alexander Cochrane assembled the British Fleet there in December of 1814 in preparation for the attack on New Orleans. He was hampered and considerably delayed by five American gunboats operating near the approaches to Lake Borgne. Unsuccessful in his attempts to enlist the natives as guides, Admiral Cochrane was forced to find his own way through the dense, treacherous swamps surrounding the City. It was an ill-fated journey, for the British were overwhelmingly defeated in the battle and General Sir Edward Pakenham who was in charge of the troops was killed.

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FORT MASSACHUSETTS

In 1856 Jefferson Davis, who was then the Secretary of War in President Pierce's cabinet, authorized construction of a fort at the west end of Ship Island in order to defend Ship Island Pass. This pass was the major waterway to New Orleans and the only natural deep water channel leading into Lake Borgne and Lake Pontchartrain.

Construction of the fort had begun when the Civil War broke out. At that time the walls were only six feet high and it was completely unfortified. In 1861 the Mississippi militia took control of the fort from the United States Corps of Engineers. The Confederates later fortified it and named it Fort Twiggs, in honor of the Confederate general in New Orleans. In the following months, the USS MASSACHUSETTS cruised the area attempting to blockade the southern coastline. After several minor skirmishes, the Confederate forces were withdrawn from Ship Island and the Union forces finally occupied the fort in September of 1861. It remained in Union control until the conclusion of the war.

In April of 1862 Admiral Farragut of the Union Navy set sail from Ship Island for New Orleans. With him were several thousand troops under the command of General Benjamin Butler, who had gathered them at Ship Island in preparation for the attack on the port city. From September 1864 until the end of the Civil War, Confederate prisoners of war were held on the island. The fort continued to be used as a federal prison until 1870, when it ceased to be a military reservation.

Immediately after the war, work on Fort Massachusetts continued. By 1870 the exterior of the fort had been finished, although the inside was never really completed. By that time it had become obvious that a brick fort could not withstand sea attack, thus rendering the fort as militarily obsolete.

The fort itself is a masterpiece of brick masonry. Architects and masons have agreed that the skills and techniques used in building the fort have been lost through time, and that today the work could not be duplicated.

Outstanding architectural features include the hand-cut brick, carefully fitted and wedged into the numerous arches and passage-ways comprising the fort. Special brick-bonding techniques were used. The walls and many arches have a three-one pattern, three layers of brick lengthwise per one layer widthwise. This is a locking technique which adds considerable strength and durability to a brick structure. The brick was shipped in mainly from New Orleans, and several different types are evident. All of the brick and stonework is completely original since no restoration work has been done on the fort.

Outstanding structural features include the three spiral stairways leading to the upper level of the fort. The granite steps are carefully cut and fitted together by hinging on the brick encasement and each other. A hot shot furnace is located in the courtyard. It was designed to heat cannonballs prior to firing at wooden enemy ships. The heat from the hot shot was enough to ignite a wooden ship as well as do structural damage with its impact. On the upper level, passageways lead under the earthen parapet at each end of the fort. These shelter two stairways as well as two ready rooms for cannonball and gunpowder.

Weaponry at Fort Massachusetts consisted mostly of 10" Columbiads, 100-pounder Parrot rifles and two 15" Rodmans. Only one Rodman gun remains today, the other cannon having been blown up and partially sold for scrap iron during World War I.

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The fort itself is quite small and offered little room for living quarters. Therefore, wooden barracks and other buildings were constructed on the island. The only rooms in the fort are two guard stations and two gunpowder magazines. The former are located on each side of the sally port or entranceway and are directly above two cisterns which offered a fresh water supply. Powder magazines are adjacent to these rooms. Air vents between the rooms are unique. They are constructed to include two right angles to insure that little could pass through them besides air.

The fort was built in the center of the western end of the island. A temporary bridge was erected across the drawbridge-well, so that ordinance could be transported into the fort. The drawbridge no longer exists, although portions of the tackle remain. Over the years, wind and wave action had removed most of the sand from around the fort, leaving it almost surrounded by water. In the spring of 1974 a sandfill was placed around the fort by the United States Corps of Engineers.

EPILOGUE

The port on the island continued active after the Civil War. In 1880 a quarantine station was built to protect the coast from yellow fever brought in by passengers on the ships. The lumber trade flourished on the island prior to the opening of a channel into Gulfport; however, once trading vessels could get to the mainland, the importance of Ship Island diminished.

It became a popular recreation area when excursion boats began to take tourists there. This was interrupted when the Armed Forces occupied the island during World War II, but was resumed afterwards.

The National Park Service received jurisdiction of Ship Island in December of 1972 and it became part of the Gulf Islands National Seashore. The Park Service is presently making plans to develop the island into a safe recreation area without altering its natural beauty.

Administrative offices for the area are located in the former Magnolia State Park in Ocean Springs. A park manager, whose address is P.O. Box T, Ocean Springs, Mississippi 39564, is in immediate charge.