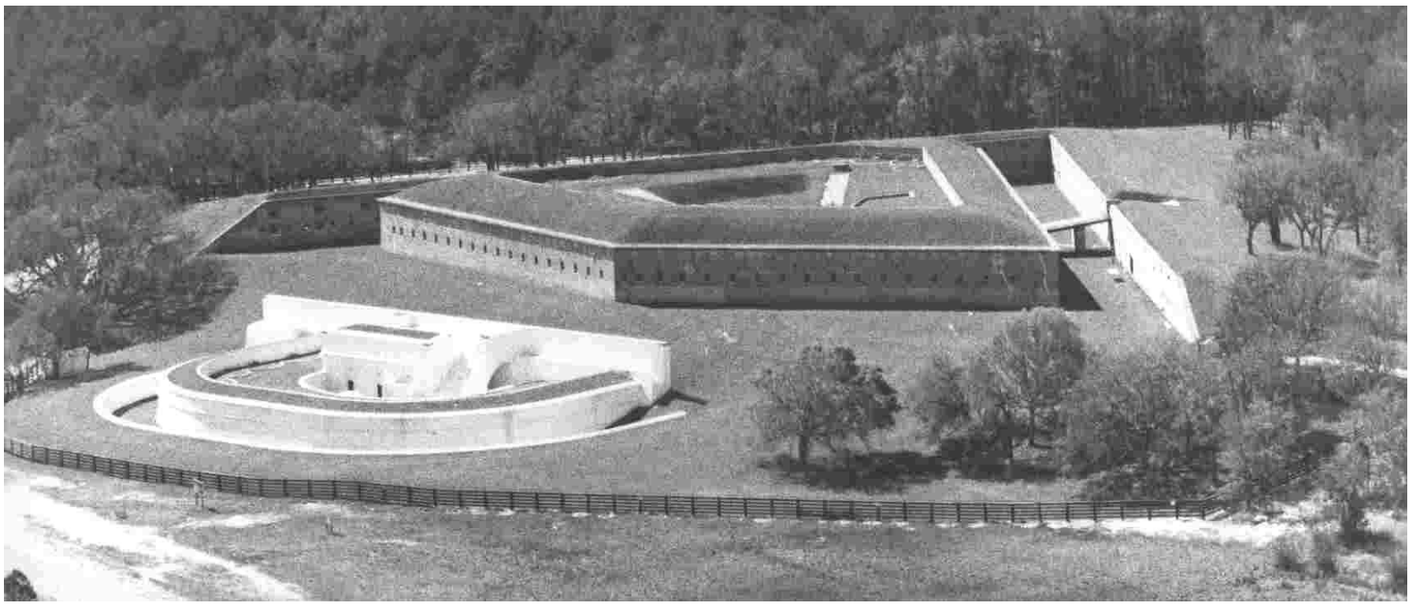
Gulf Islands

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Gulf Islands National Seashore
Florida District

Fort Barrancas



European colonization, American expansion, and threats of invasion led to the building of coastal forts along the northern Gulf Coast. Situated on the bluffs (barrancas) overlooking Pensacola Bay and the gateway to the outside world, Fort Barrancas served as the lock on the gate from potential foreign invaders.

Site of Many Flags Spanish, French, British, American, Confederate

Concerned about French and British explorations and colonization, Spain built the first colony and fort near here in 1698. The French briefly occupied the site in 1719. Later the British acquired Pensacola in 1763 and built a naval redoubt on the barrancas. Bernado de Gálvez led Spanish troops to recapture Pensacola from the British during the American Revolution in 1781. The Spanish built new fortifications on the barrancas: San Carlos de Barrancas and Bateria de San Antonio (the water battery).

Construction and Restoration

General Andrew Jackson seized the Spanish forts in 1814 and 1818. When Florida became part of the United States in 1821 the U.S. Navy selected Pensacola Bay as the site for the Warrington Navy Yard. In order to protect the navy yard the U.S. Army, with a force of some 60 contracted slaves, made improvements to the Spanish water battery and built Fort Barrancas over the ruins of San Carlos de Barrancas from 1839 to 1844.

Civil War

On January 12, 1861 Alabama and Florida state militias occupied Fort Barrancas, Fort McRee, the Advanced Redoubt, and the navy yard. Federal forces had moved to Fort Pickens two days earlier. This produced a tense stalemate at Pensacola that rivalled that at Charleston and Fort Sumter in the weeks before the Civil War began.

General Braxton Bragg took command for the Confederate Army at Pensacola in March. A strict disciplinarian, Bragg banned alcohol within five miles of the camps and instituted a rigid schedule of drills and fatigue duties. Each officer was expected to be ready for "...an intelligent discharge of all the duties of his station, and all soldiers..." were to devote themselves to the "... acquirements of knowledge so essential to the success of the glorious cause on which we are engaged."

Drilling in the hot sun while closely laced up in heavy woolen uniforms was blamed for much sickness. Hundreds of soldiers were also stricken by consumption, malaria, and diarrhea.

Action came in September with a raid on the navy yard by about 100 Federal marines and sailors. Bragg responded on an October evening with about 1000 men in a night attack on Santa Rosa Island, burning the camp of the 6th New York Infantry. Federal forces answered with a massive bombardment on November 22nd and 23rd, heavily damaging Fort McRee and the navy yard. Bragg wrote, "for the number and caliber of guns and weight of metal brought into action it would rank with the heaviest bombardments in the world." Confederates abandoned Pensacola in May 1862, and Barrancas saw no further combat.

United States Coast Defense

Fort Barrancas was an integral part of the coast defense system until 1947 when coastal forts were declared surplus. In 1971 Fort Barrancas became part of the newly formed Gulf Islands National Seashore. Extensive restoration of the forts was completed by the National Park Service in 1980. Today, Fort Barrancas symbolizes the lock on the gate that protected Pensacola Bay and its navy yard from potential foreign invaders.

Guide to Fort Barrancas

1. **Glacis:** The earthen slope hid the fort from land-based artillery.

2. **Scarp and Counterscarp:** The main walls (scarp) supported the parade and provided defense against both ships and infantry. The outer walls (counterscarp) supported the glacis and provided cannon sites to fire down the ditch.

3. **Ditch:** A dry moat covered two sides of the fort. Assaulting infantry entering the ditch would suffer heavy casualties from muskets and cannon fire through windows in the walls.

4. **Drawbridge:** Operated by a counterweight and winch, it pivoted at the center. It could be raised to prevent a surprise attack. A harmless shot fired by a guard on this drawbridge on the night of January 8, 1861 is sometimes considered the first shot in the American Civil War.

5. Sally Port: The entrance to the fort was guarded by heavy oak doors. A small wicket gate allowed entry without opening the main doors.

6. **Guard Room:** This room had four bunks for a six-man guard detail. They rotated with two men on guard duty (2-hours on, 4-hours off, for 24-hours) while four men rested. The main barracks were to the east of the fort.

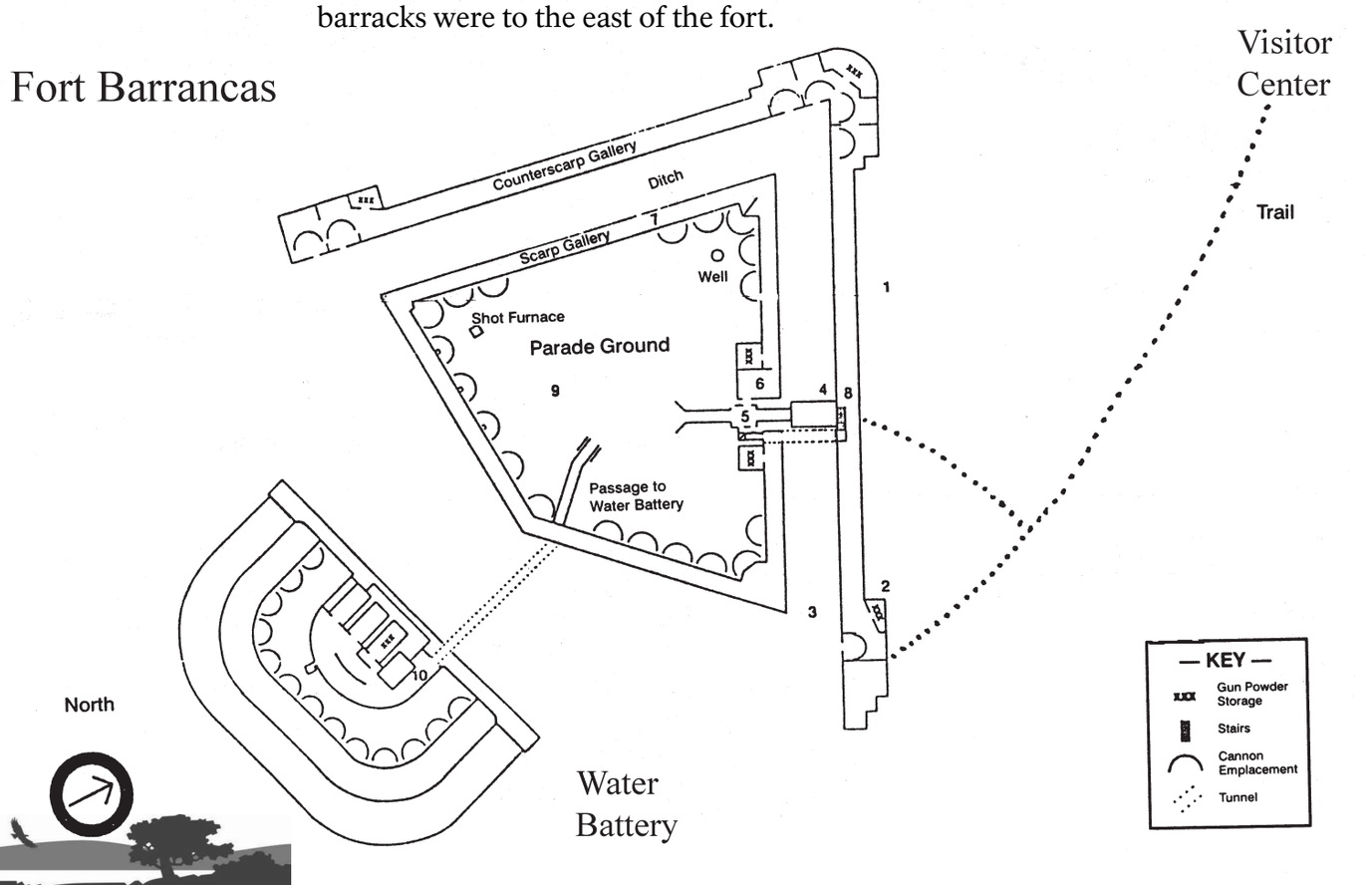
7. **Scarp Gallery:** A series of arches supported the sand fill and allowed access to the loopholes for muskets. Vents at the top allowed smoke from the guns to escape.

8. **Counterscarp Gallery:** A tunnel under the ditch leads to this wall, containing loopholes, cannon emplacements, and powder magazines. Some visitors have reported the ghost image of a confederate soldier in this gallery.

9. **Parade:** The center of the fort held a hot shot furnace where cannonballs were heated for firing at wooden sailing ships. In 1845 the armament of Fort Barrancas was: ten 24-pounders (pdrs), two 8-inch howitzers, five 18-pdrs, three 12-pdrs, one 8-inch mortar, two coehorn mortars, two 6-pdrs, a 12-pdr on a field carriage, plus eight 24-pdr flank howitzers in the couterscarp. In the water battery there were eleven 32-pdrs, two 8-inch seacoast howitzers, and two 10-inch mortars.

24-pounder cannon

10. **Water Battery**: The tunnel from the parade leads to the water battery, originally constructed by the Spanish and named Bateria de San Antonio. Cannon fire from the Battery skipped over the surface of the bay to hit ships at the waterline.



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