



Cockspur Island: The Human Conquest of Nature Walking Tour Outside Fort Pulaski

For hundreds of years, humans have been modifying the environment on Cockspur Island: First to adapt the island for military purposes, then to promote commercial shipping at the port of Savannah, and now for the preservation of Fort Pulaski. A walk around the outside of Fort Pulaski affords a good opportunity to see the interaction between humans and nature on Cockspur Island.

Use the attached map to find your way around the fort. The numbered stops are recommended locations for teachable moments. There are merely suggestions. Your own judgment, observations, and teaching ability will enhance your tour.

The Basics

Time: 30-60 minutes

Distance: About 1/2 mile.

Directions: See the map on page 6. From the drawbridge, walk counter clockwise around the outside of the moat until you return to your starting point.

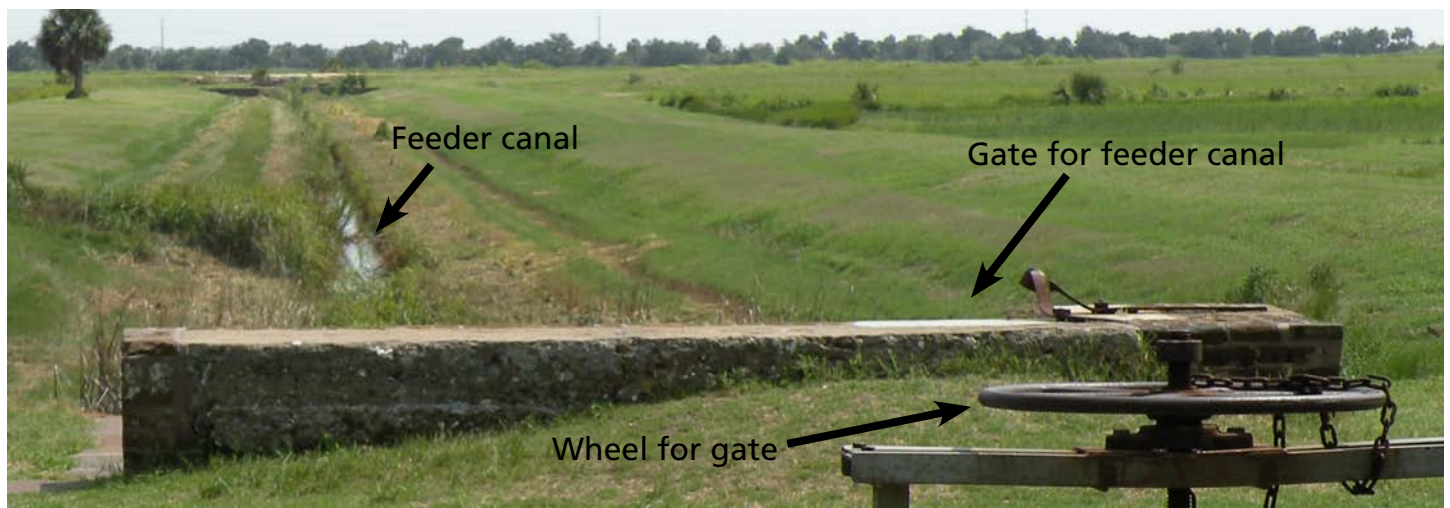
Safety:

- Watch out for fire ant nests in the grass. They look like small mounds of earth.
- Alligators are common in and around the moat. Do not tease, feed or approach the alligators.
- Beware of the moat. The water is six to eight feet deep.

Stop 1--The Moat

The moat was dug to be eight feet deep. It represented yet another barrier for enemy soldiers attempting to gain entry into the fort. As long as the water was over the heads of the soldiers, it became a formidable barrier.

The human-made moat has created a habitat for the natural fauna of the area. Alligators are frequent visitors to the moat. It is home to fish and turtles, which are food for the alligators.

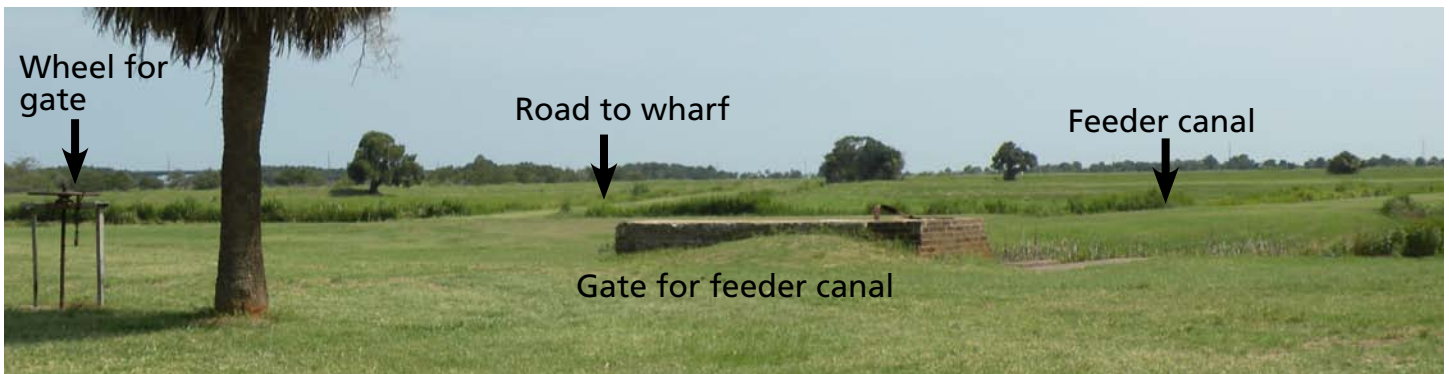


Stop 2--Feeder Canal

The feeder canal connects the moat with the south channel of the Savannah River. There are gates at each end of the canal. With both gates open, river water flows into the moat with the incoming tide. With the gates closed, the water level in the moat remains stable as the tide changes. During the civil War, the soldiers probably dumped human waste and garbage into the moat. The moat was most likely flushed out by opening the gates as the tide went out.

The gates and feeder canal still work, and from time to time the moat is flushed out. In summer, the moat water tends to get depleted of oxygen and fresh river water brings in more oxygen.

The wheel to operate the gate is nearby. Today, an underground well is generally used to fill the moat with fresh water rather than the brackish river water.



Stop 3--Old Road

The old road leads to the site of the wharf on the south channel of the Savannah River. There was no bridge or land access to the fort before the 1930s, so all supplies arrived at the fort by boat.

During construction of the fort, a mule-drawn railroad connected the wharf with the moat in order to get heavy building supplies to the fort.



Historic photo



Stop 4--Breached Corner

You can still see damage from the battle in 1862. The Union army used cannons to pound two giant holes (or breaches) in the corner of the fort. Union soldiers repaired these holes right after the battle. The large section of orange brick at the corner is the Civil War-era repair job.

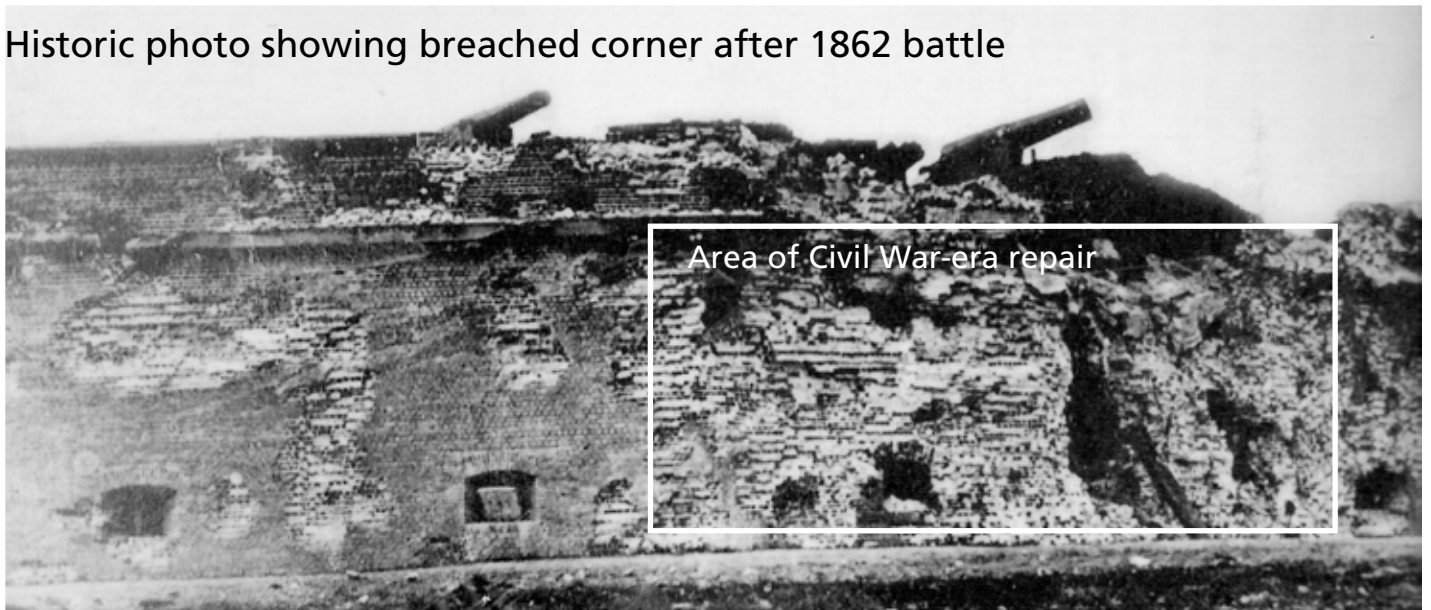
If you look above the second opening to the left of the patch, you can see a small, dark circle. That is the back end of an artillery projectile

that has been in the wall since 1862. The cannon protruding above the fort was damaged during the battle. The National Park Service has not repaired this damage because it is a tangible and visible reminder of the battle from 1862.

The Union cannons were shooting at the fort from one to two miles away. You cannot see their location today because trees now block the view. The Union cannons were on Tybee Island.



Historic photo showing breached corner after 1862 battle

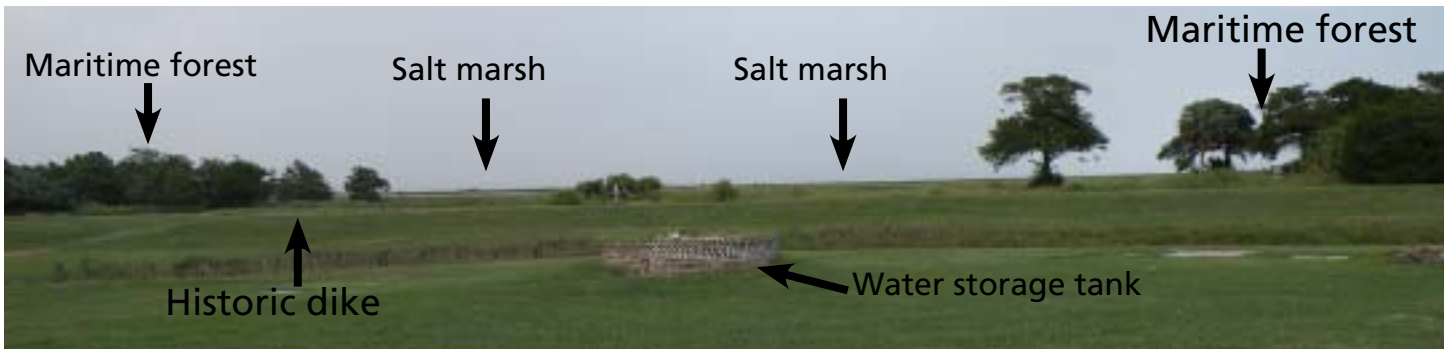


As you walk around the fort, notice the tree line in the distance. This represents the hand of humans on the island. Originally, the entire island was a vast salt marsh. A salt marsh develops where the land is sheltered from the battering of waves, yet is washed daily by the rise and fall of the tide. No trees can grow in the harsh environment of the salt marsh.

When all shipping for Savannah was shifted into the north channel of the river, the channel was repeatedly dredged to accommodate the ever larger cargo ships. The mud from the bottom of the river was deposited on the island, eventually raising part of the island out of the salt marsh. The higher sections of land, no longer being covered

by the salt water of tides, supported traditional plant growth. Through ecological succession, trees eventually developed on those pieces of ground. From the northeast corner of the fort, you can see an open expanse of salt marsh, with maritime forests developing on each side.

The area immediately around the fort was removed from the salt marsh by the work of humans. The historic dike, which is about 12 feet above sea level, keeps the high tide away from the fort. The dike completely encircles the fort. It is a great place to walk, run or ride a bike, especially at sunrise when the deer and bird life are in plain view.



The round brick structure in front of you is a water storage tank. It was built as part of the construction village. It took 17 years to build the fort. During that time, the government built a village of workshops, barracks and offices for the construction workers. The water storage tanks collected rainwater for drinking.

As you look to the northwest, today you see the parking lot and a developing maritime forest. For most of the 1800s, that entire area was covered by the construction village. The entire construction village (except for the water tanks) was destroyed by hurricanes in the late 1800s. While humans have conquered much of nature on Cockspur Island, we have never been able to control hurricanes.

Historic view to the northwest





Stop 6--The Cemetery

Cockspur Island has been the site of one fort or another since the late 1700s. You will notice one of the two headstones has a date from the early 1800s.

Thirteen Confederate prisoners died while in captivity at Fort Pulaski during the Civil War. (More soldiers died as prisoners than during the battle for the fort.) The Confederates are also buried in this cemetery. Their graves are not marked.

Stop 7--The Mounds

These mounds were built after the Civil War. They were the replacement technology for the brick fort. After giving up the brick fort as obsolete in the early 1870s, the army used the mounds as a fortification until the concrete battery was built near the river in the 1890s.

During the civil War, the area with the mounds was flat and was used to store equipment and for kitchen facilities for the average soldiers.

Conclusion

Cockspur Island has been greatly influenced by the hand of humans. Today, the National Park Service manages the island to promote the preservation of the historic fort and related historic structures. The area inside the historic dike is mowed so that trees will not grow and compromise the historically correct open appearance. For the same reason, visual intrusions are kept to a minimum around the fort.

Once the park meets its obligations to protect the fort and the surrounding landscape, the park strives to let nature run its course on the island. There is no hunting on the island. The areas of slash marsh lying outside the historic dike are left in their natural state. The animal life on the island, such as the fiddler crabs, water birds, alligators and deer, are left to their own devices.

Other cultural resources, such as the Cockspur Lighthouse and the water storage tanks, are being preserved.

You should now be back at your starting place. Thank you for visiting Fort Pulaski National Monument.

Map for self-guided tour

