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Fort Moultrie

Official Map and Guide

Fort Sumter National Monument
South Carolina

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Guardian at the Straits

From the time of the earliest European settlements to the end of World War II, coastal fortifications guarded the harbors and shores of the United States. Here at Fort Moultrie the story of two centuries of seacoast defense is told through a unique plan of restoration. Five sections of the fort and two outlying areas, each mounting typical weapons, represent a different historical period in the life of the three Fort Moultries.

The first fort on Sullivans Island was still incomplete when Adm. Sir Peter Parker and nine warships attacked it on June 28, 1776. After a nine-hour battle, the ships were forced to retire. Charleston was saved from British occupation, and the fort was named in honor of its commander, William Moultrie. In 1780 the British finally captured Charleston, abandoning it only on the advent of peace. After the Revolution Fort Moultrie was neglected, and by 1791 little of it remained. Then, in 1793, war broke out between England and France. The next year Congress, seeking to safeguard American shores, authorized the first system of nationwide coastal fortifications. A second Fort Moultrie, one of 20 new forts along the Atlantic coast, was completed in 1798. It too suffered from neglect and was finally destroyed by a hurricane in 1804. By 1807 many of the other First System fortifications were in need of extensive repair. Congress responded by authorizing funds for a Second System, which included a third Fort Moultrie. By 1809 a new brick fort stood on Sullivans Island.

Between 1809 and 1860 Fort Moultrie changed little. The parapet was altered and the armament modernized, but the big improvement in Charleston's defenses during this period was the construction of Fort Sumter at the entrance of the harbor. The forts ringing Charleston Harbor—Moultrie, Sumter, Johnson, and Castle Pinckney—were meant to complement each other, but ironically they received their baptism of fire as opponents. In December 1860 South Carolina seceded from the Union, and the Federal garrison abandoned Fort Moultrie for the stronger Sumter. Three and a half months later, Confederate troops shelled Sumter into submission, plunging the nation into civil war. In April 1863 Federal ironclads and shore batteries began a 20-month bombardment of Sumter and Moultrie, yet Charleston's defenses held. When the Confederate army evacuated the city in February 1865, Fort Sumter was little more than a pile of rubble and Fort Moultrie lay hidden under the bank of sand that protected its walls from Federal shells. The new rifled cannon used during the Civil War had demolished the brick-walled fortifications.

Fort Moultrie was modernized in the 1870s, employing concepts developed during the war. Huge new cannon were installed, and magazines and bombproofs were built of thick concrete, then buried under tons of earth to absorb the explosion of heavy shells. In 1885, President Grover Cleveland appointed Secretary of War William C. Endicott to head a board to review the coastal defenses of the United States and recommend how they might be improved in light of newly developing weapons technology. The system that emerged, named for Endicott, again modernized the nation's fortifications. New batteries of concrete and steel were constructed in Fort Moultrie. Larger weapons were emplaced elsewhere on Sullivan's Island, and the old fort became just a small part of the Fort Moultrie reservation that covered much of the island.

As technology changed, harbor defense became more complex. The world wars brought new threats of submarine and aerial attack and required new means of defense at Moultrie. Yet these armaments also became obsolete as nuclear weapons and guided missiles altered the entire concept of national defense. Today Fort Moultrie has been restored to portray the major periods of its history. A visitor to the fort moves steadily backwards in time from the World War II Harbor Entrance Control Post to the site of the palmetto-log fort of 1776.

Revolutionary War

In its 171-year history, Fort Moultrie has defended Charleston Harbor twice. The first time, on June 28, 1776, during the Revolutionary War, the 30 smoothbore cannon of the original fort drove off a British fleet mounting 200 guns. Despite its lack of use in combat, the fort was maintained until 1947 to provide a ready, and inexpensive, deterrent to any prospective enemy.

Civil War

By the 1860s, seacoast weapons like this rifled and banded 32-pounder used by Confederates at Fort Moultrie stood side by side with older, heavy caliber, smoothbore cannon. For nearly two years, federal forces bombarded the Charleston forts from land and sea, and though the masonry walls of Forts Sumter and Moultrie crumbled under the shelling, both forts were able to hold back the Union attacks.

World War I

The technology of weaponry advanced rapidly after the Civil War. Some huge smoothbore cannon were still in use in 1900, but by World War I many seacoast forts, such as Battery Thomson a mile east of Moultrie, were mounting breechloading disappearing rifles like the 10-inch model below. Upon firing, the rifle pivoted down so it could be reloaded in safety behind the protection of tons of earth and concrete.

World War II

The 1940s brought new challenges to the nation's seacoast defenses. Submarines and airplanes joined battleships as threats to the country's security. As a result, anti-aircraft guns were added to the fort's armament and mines were laid in Charleston Harbor. In 1944, a new Harbor Entrance Control Post was built (below, left), from which all the city's harbor defenses were coordinated.

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A view of the Attack made by the British Fleet under the command of Sir Peter Parker against Fort Moultrie on Sullivans Island June 28, 1776 and a distant view of the transports in Five Fathem hole. Includes Active, Williams, Bristol, Experiment, Friendship (enveloped in smoke), Syren, Solebay, Acteon (aground), Sphynx (going off with the loss of her bowsprit) Thunder bomb ketch (disabled).Image illustrated in 1783 by Nicholas Pocock.

University of South Carolina, courtesy/
Pocock, Nicholas, 1783 illustration by

Cannon, 30 Smoothbore, features Revolutionary war soldiers c. 1776
National Park Service

Cannon, civil war era c. 1860, rifled and banded 32 pounder, used by
Confederates at Fort Moultrie
National Park Service

New Ironsides, iron-clad frigate and Ericsson Battery going into action at
Charleston
National Park Service

Rifle, breechloading and disappearing, 10" model of
National Park Service

Harbor Entrance Control Post/Harbor Defense Control Post, built in 1944
in Charleston Harbor
Harbor Entrance Control Post /Harbor Defense Control Post

Selditch, Ben, c. 1945 photograph courtesy of

Submarine and Mines, from World War II era, c. 1940
National Park Service

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Touring Fort Moultrie

A Guide to Fort Moultrie

Throughout its long history, Fort Moultrie has undergone numerous changes as improving military and engineering technologies added to the complexities of harbor defense. Instead of looking as it did at any one particular period, the fort has been restored to reflect these changes from the camouflaged Harbor Entrance Control Post of World War II to the site of the palmetto log fort of 1776. Near the fort's entrance are the graves of Osceola, celebrated Seminole leader who died here in 1838, and five of 62 seamen who lost their lives when the U.S. monitor Patapsco was sunk midway between Forts Sumter and Moultrie in 1865.

The following guide identifies the main features of the fort today. Each is keyed by number to the painting above. Please note that the painting shows the fort as seen from the visitor center. The maps below show the forts as they would have been seen by ships entering Charleston Harbor.

1 World War II

This Harbor Entrance Control Post/Harbor Defense Command Post, completed March 7, 1944, coordinated all of the harbor defenses around Charleston. Several of the downstairs rooms are furnished.

2 Harbor Defense, 1898-1939

These two batteries were designed to protect the mine field at the entrance to Charleston Harbor and to act in conjunction with other batteries on Sullivans Island and at Fort Sumter.

3 1870s Modernization

After the Civil War the fort was renovated applying concepts learned during that conflict. These two weapons represent Fort Moultrie in the period from 1873 to 1898.

4 Civil War

During this period there was great technological change in coastal defense weapons. Confederate defenders made many alterations in the fort and its armament to cope with these changes, including removing the barracks.

5 Fort Moultrie III

For more than 50 years, from 1809 to 1860, Fort Moultrie changed little, except for replacing old smoothbore cannon with new. This section represents the third fort from its construction to the eve of the Civil War.

6 Fort Moultrie II (site)

Constructed in response to disagreements with France, the second Fort Moultrie had a brief life. Though short-lived, the fort was important as a part of the first system of United States seacoast defense.

7 Fort Moultrie I (site)

Though not part of a defense system, the first Fort Moultrie represents the beginnings of harbor defense in the United States.

8 Cannon Walk

The artillery pieces located along this walk date from the Civil War and after, a period of rapid technological development. These pieces tell the story of the evolution of seacoast defense weaponry.

9 Battery Jasper

This battery was part of the coastal defense system that integrated heavy coastal artillery, mine fields, and rapid-fire guns into an effective defense system. One of its gun positions is open and explained by numerous interpretive exhibits. Battery Logan, beyond Jasper, and Batteries Bingham and McCorkle inside Fort Moultrie were also parts of this system.

About Your Visit

Fort Moultrie is open 9 a.m. to 5 p.m daily, except December 25 and January 1. Groups should make reservations for guided tours. Pets are not allowed inside the fort.

Safety

Please watch your step and use caution in the fort. We ask that you use the paths and do not climb on mounds or cannon.

Getting Here

The fort is on Sullivans Island, S.C. Coming from Charleston, take U.S. 17 (business) to Mt. Pleasant; turn right on S.C. 703. At Sullivans Island, turn right onto Middle Street. The fort is 1.5 miles from the intersection.

More Information

Fort Moultrie is administered by the National Park Service as part of Fort Sumter National Monument.

Contact: Fort Sumter National Monument

1214 Middle Street

Sullivans Island

SC 29482-9748

843-883-3123

www.nps.gov/fomo

Also visit the National Park Service website:

www.nps.gov

Harbor Defense

Fort Moultrie was well situated to guard Charleston Harbor. Because of shoals at the harbor entrance, ships were forced to enter the harbor from the south and sail toward the fort on Sullivans Island (dotted line). In this position they could not fire on the fort until they turned into the harbor. In the mid-19th century Fort Sumter added its firepower to keep ships out of the harbor.

Moultrie I

The first fort on Sullivans Island was hastily built in 1776 to protect Charleston from an attack by the British. The fort was constructed by raising two palmetto-log walls 16 feet apart and filling the space between with sand. The spongy palmetto and yielding sand readily absorbed shot and shell from the British ships and protected the American defenders.

Moultrie II

In 1794 Charleston became one of 16 ports to receive the new defenses of the First American System of Fortifications. The second Fort Moultrie, part of this system, was a five-sided structure with earth and timber walls 17 feet high. The fort was completed in 1798, but soon fell into ruin from lack of upkeep. A hurricane in 1804 destroyed the fort.

Moultrie III

For 138 years the third Fort Moultrie has undergone modification. The fort's walls have often been covered with sand to protect them from shells, and the interior of the fort filled with earth and concrete to mount new weapons. Over this period armament has changed from smooth-bore cannon to disappearing rifles to anti-aircraft and anti-submarine weapons.

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Fort Moultrie, c. 1983 illustration, as viewed from visitor center,
National Park Service/
Townsend, Lloyd.K., illustration by

Map, Charleston Harbor area ship routes, includes Fort Moultrie, Fort
Sumter, Fort Johnston, and Castle Pickney
National Park Service

Fort Moultrie, First Version built in 1776, constructed by aligning interior
and exterior palmetto log walls, positioned 16 feet apart, filled between with
sand
National Park Service

Fort Moultrie, Second Version built 1794-1798, destroyed by hurricane in
1804, 5-sided, 17 feet high structure, constructed of earth and timber walls
National Park Service

Fort Moultrie, Third Version completed in 1809, constructed of brick, interior
filled with concrete
National Park Service/