Fort Moultrie Brochure (English-Text Only)

Fort Sumter National Monument
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

(Cover Illustration: A View of the British Attack, Nicholas Pocock, Courtesy of the University of South Carolina)

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. Hear at Fort Moultrie the story of two centuries of seacoast defense is told through a unique plan of restoration. Five section 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 Park 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 with 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 American System of nationwide coastal fortifications. A second Fort Moultrie, on 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 fornications were in need of extensive repair. Congress responded by authorizing funds for a Second American System, which included a third Fort Moultrie. By 1809 a new brick fort stood on Sullivans Island.

Between1809 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, and 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 the 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 Sullivans 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 defenses became more complex. The world wars brought new threats of submarine and aerial attack and required new means of defense of 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 highlight the major periods of its history. At the fort you move steadily back 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. (Image: NPS)

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. (Images: NPS)

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 breech-loading 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. (Image: NPS)

World War II

The 1940s brought new challenges for seacoast defenses. Submarines and airplanes joined battleships as security threats. 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 call the city's harbor defenses were coordinated. (Images: ©Ben Selditch; NPS)

Throughout its long history, Fort Moultrie has undergone many changes as improving military and engineering technologies made harbor defense more complex. Instead of looking as it did at any one 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 features of today's fort, keyed by number to the painting above (Illustration: NPS/Kenneth Townsend). The painting shows the fort as seen from the visitor center. The maps below show the forts as seen by ships entering Charleston Harbor.

1. **World War II** This Harbor Entrance Control Post/Harbor Defense Command Post, completed in 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 for was renovated applying concepts learned during that conflict. These two weapons represent Fort Moultrie in the period from 1873-1898.

4. **Civil War** Great technological changes in coastal defense weapons occurred during this era. Confederate defenders made many alterations in the fort and its armament to cope with these changes, including removing the barracks.

5. **Fort Moultrie III** 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) Built 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 American System of seacoast defenses (1794-1801).

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 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 an effective coastal defense system that integrated heavy coastal artillery, mine fields, and rapid-fire guns. 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.

Harbor Defense

Fort Moultrie was well situated to guard Charleston Harbor. Shoals at the harbor entrance forced ships to enter the harbor from the south and sail toward the fort on Sullivans Island (*dashed lined*). In this position ships 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. (Image: Naval History Division, Department of the Navy)

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 wall 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 American defenders. (Image: Library of Congress)

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. (Image: National Archives)

Moultrie III

Throughout its long history the third Fort Moultrie has undergone modification. The fort's walls have often been covered with sand to protect them from artillery shells, and the interior of the fort has been filled with earth and concrete to mount new weapons. Its armament, too, has changed from smooth-bore cannon to disappearing rifles to anti-aircraft and anti-submarine weapons. (Image: National Archives)

About Your Visit

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

Safety

Watch your step and use caution in the fort. Please 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 a part of Fort Sumter National Monument.

Contact:

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