



FORT JEFFERSON NATIONAL MONUMENT · FLORIDA

Jefferson, largest of the 19th-century American coastal forts, is the central feature of the seven Dry Tortugas Islands and the surrounding shoals and waters of the Gulf of Mexico that make up Fort Jefferson National Monument. Though off the beaten track, the monument is famous for its bird and marine life, as well as for its legends of pirates and sunken gold.



Dry Tortugas • Like a strand of beads hanging from the tip of Florida, reef islands trail westward into the Gulf of Mexico. Almost 70 miles west of Key West, is a cluster of coral keys called Dry Tortugas. In 1513, Spanish explorer Ponce de León named them *las Tortugas*—the Turtles—because of “the great amount of turtles which there do breed.” The later name, Dry Tortugas, warns the mariner that there is no fresh water here.

Past Tortugas sailed the treasure-laden ships of Spain, braving shipwreck and corsairs. Not until Florida became part of the United States in 1821 were the pirates finally driven out. Then, for additional insurance to a growing United States commerce in the gulf, a lighthouse was built at Tortugas, on Garden Key, in 1825. Thirty-one years later the present 150-foot light was erected on Loggerhead Key.

The strategic importance of the Tortugas was recognized early. In the words of the naval captain who surveyed the Keys in 1830, Tortugas could “control navigation of the Gulf.” Commerce from the growing Mississippi Valley sailed the gulf to reach the Atlantic. Enemy seizure of the Tortugas would cut off this vital traffic, and a fleet operating from this strategic base could be effective against even a superior force.

There were still keen memories of Jack-

and England was currently developing her West Indies possessions. Trouble in Cuba was near. Texas, a new republic, seemed about to form an alliance with France or England, thus providing the Europeans with a foothold on the gulf coast. To guard against this possibility, Fort Jefferson was built on Garden Key.

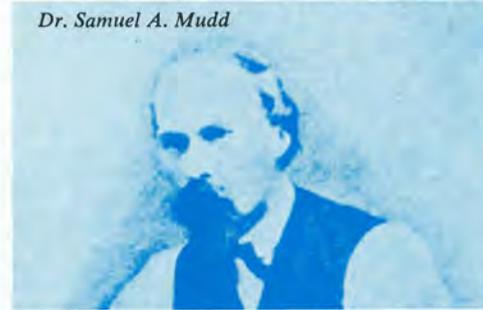
Key to the Gulf of Mexico • During the first half of the 1800’s the United States began a chain of seacoast defenses from Maine to Texas. Fort Jefferson, one-half mile in perimeter, was the largest link in the chain. From foundation to crown its 8-foot-thick walls stand 50 feet high. Its three gun tiers were designed for 450 guns, and it was large enough to garrison 1,500 men. Planned and supervised by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the fort was started in 1846, and, although work went on for almost 30 years, it was never finished. Artisans imported from the North and slaves from Key West made up most of the labor force. After 1861 the slaves were partly replaced by military prisoners, but slave labor did not end completely until Lincoln freed the slaves in 1863.



Federal troops occupied the half-completed, unarmed Fort Jefferson on January 19, 1861, to keep it from falling into the hands of Florida secessionists, but aside from a few warning shots at Confederate privateers there was no action. The average garrison numbered 500 men, and building quarters for them accounted for most of the wartime construction.

Little important work was done after 1866, for the new rifled cannon had already made the fort obsolete. Further, the engineers found that the foundations rested not upon a solid coral reef, but upon sand and coral boulders washed up by the sea. The huge structure settled, and the walls began to crack.

For almost 10 years after the war, Fort Jefferson remained a prison. Among the prisoners sent there in 1865 were several of the “Lincoln Conspirators”—Michael O’Loughlin, Samuel Arnold, Edward Spangler, and Dr. Samuel A. Mudd. Dr. Mudd, knowing nothing of President Lincoln’s assassination, had set the broken leg of the fugitive assassin, John Wilkes Booth. The



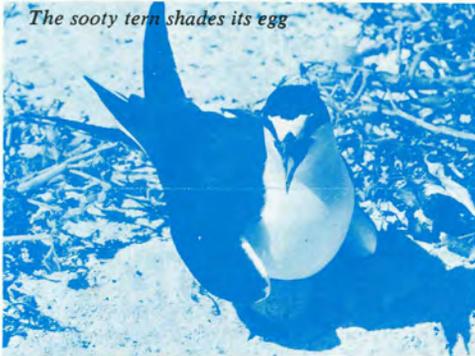
physician was convicted of conspiracy and sentenced to life imprisonment at hard labor.

Normally, the Tortugas was a healthful post, but in 1867 yellow fever came. From August 18 to November 14 the epidemic raged, striking 270 of the 300 men at the fort. Among the first of the 38 fatalities was the post surgeon, Maj. Joseph Sim Smith. Dr. Mudd, together with Dr. Daniel Whitehurst from Key West, worked day and night to fight the scourge. Two years later, Dr. Mudd was pardoned.

Because of hurricane damage and another fever outbreak, Fort Jefferson was abandoned in 1874. During the 1880’s, however, the United States began a naval building program, and Navy men looked at this outpost as a possible naval base. From Tortugas Harbor the battleship *Maine* weighed anchor for Cuba, where she was blown up in Havana Harbor on February 15, 1898. Soon the Navy began a coaling station outside the fort walls, bringing the total cost of the fortification to some \$3.5 million. The big sheds were hardly completed before a hurricane smashed the loading rigs.

One of the first naval wireless stations was built at the fort early in the 1900’s, and, during World War I, Tortugas was equipped to serve as a seaplane base. But as the military moved out again, fire and storms and salvagers took their toll, leaving the “Gibraltar of the Gulf” a vast ruin.

Tortugas birds • One of our great national wildlife spectacles occurs each year between April and September, when the sooty terns gather on Bush Key for their nesting season. The terns come by the thousands from the Caribbean Sea and west-central Atlantic Ocean. As early as mid-January, sooties begin conducting nocturnal maneuvers over the Tortugas, spending their days at sea. Presumably, mating occurs during this time, for when they land on Bush Key in March, egg-laying begins immediately. Their nests are no more than depressions in the warm sand. The parents take turns shading their single egg from the sun. When the young are strong enough for continuous flight, the colony disperses. Unless hurricanes carry them farther north, most adult sooties spend the winter in the gulf and northwest Caribbean. Juvenile sooties, however, leave their parents

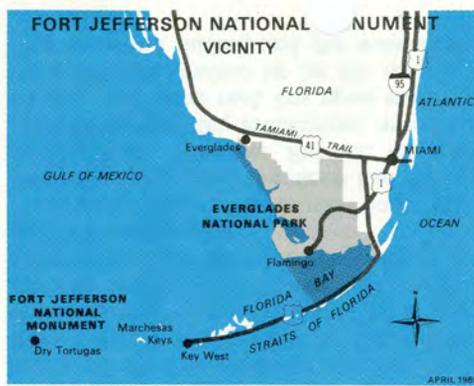


The sooty tern shades its egg

and follow an indirect, 9,000-mile route to West Africa and do not return to the Tortugas until at least their fourth summer.

The presence of these tropical oceanic birds at Tortugas was recorded by Ponce de León (1513), Capt. John Hawkins (1565), John James Audubon (1832), and Louis Agassiz (1858). Prior to the early 1900's commercial egg raiding reduced the colony to a mere 4,000 individual birds. From 1903 a resident warden effectively protected the birds during the nesting season, and today the rookery contains an estimated 100,000 breeding adults. A colony of brown noddies, interspersed among the sooties, comprises only about 2,500 birds, but the population is slowly increasing. The two species share the ability to capture fish and squid from the surface of the water while in flight, rather than diving into it as do terns.

Large numbers of frigatebirds also congregate at the Dry Tortugas in summer.



With a wingspan of almost 7 feet, the frigatebird is among the most graceful of soaring birds. Though it may occasionally indulge in aerial piracy, it usually captures its own fish from the water. A few blue-faced and brown boobies are observed occasionally. Roseate terns nest on Hospital, Bush, and Long Keys at the same time other terns are nesting. In season, a continuous procession of songbirds and other migrants fly over or rest at the islands, which lie across one of the principal flyways from the United States to Cuba and South America. Familiar gulls and terns of the North, as well as many migratory shore birds, spend the winter at Tortugas.

Marine life • The warm, clear waters of the Gulf of Mexico and maximum available light combine to produce optimum conditions for the development of coral reefs. These formations are associated with the shallow waters on the outer edge of offshore tropical islands. The true builders of coral reefs are small primitive animals called polyps. Over the centuries accumulations of living polyps have formed coral colonies of rigid structures.

The reef complex supports a myriad of marine life. Multicolored sea ferns sway in the gentle ocean currents, beckoning the viewer to take a closer look; sea anemones thrust their rose and lavender tentacles upward in search of food; a lobster's antennae wave frantically, trying to detect potential danger. Other strange animals, including several species of sponges of various sizes and colors, dot the sandy bottom. Large clusters of staghorn coral resemble an underwater forest.

Indiscriminate hunting has diminished the sea turtle population, but these large crea-

tures are still observed in the Dry Tortugas area. Species seen recently include hawksbill, green, and loggerhead turtles. Thousands of hatchling green turtles have been released on the beaches of Everglades National Park and Fort Jefferson National Monument in an effort to enlarge populations. Other such releases were made throughout the Caribbean area, and additional releases are planned for future years.

Although a diversity of lower animal forms inhabits the reef, the most dominant creatures are the scores of aggressive and colorful small fishes. Vivid shades of red, yellow, green, and blue characterize the reef fishes. The varied hues serve the purposes of camouflage, recognition, warning, or as an aid to courtship. The small fish attract larger ones, including the amberjack, grouper, wahoo, and tarpon, which play an



Staghorn coral

important ecological role by feeding on the smaller fish and keeping their numbers in check. All the residents of the coral reef must be constantly alert for the marauders of the sea—the ever-cruising shark and the swift-moving barracuda. Sitting atop the food chain, these predators are also essential in maintaining a natural balance in the marine habitat.

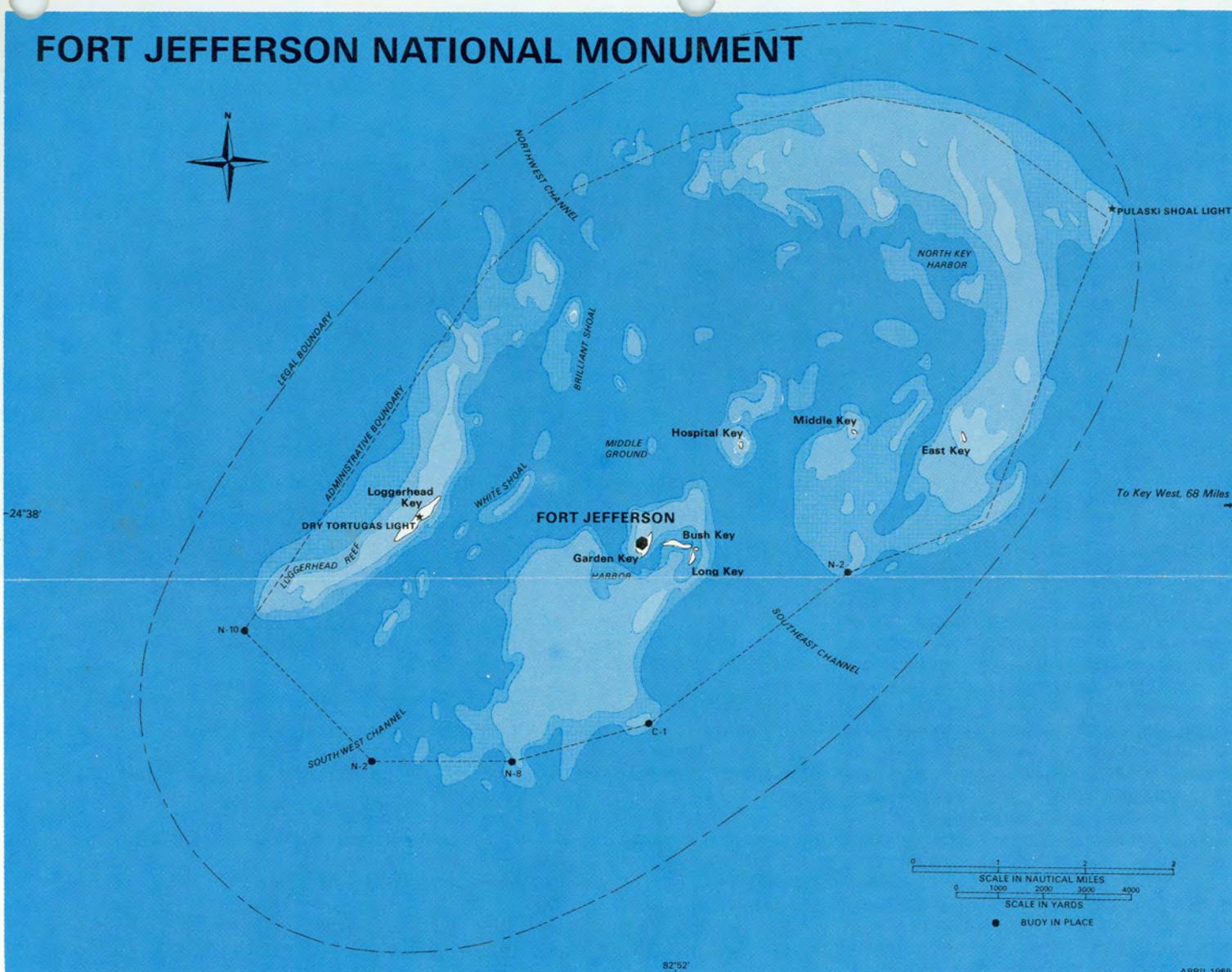
Plants • Fewer than 50 species of land plants are native to the Dry Tortugas, because the saline soil, long droughts, and frequent storms impose severe growing conditions. Many plants have been introduced, either accidentally or for ornamental purposes. On Garden and Loggerhead Keys, the latter group includes such conspicuous plants as coconut and date palms, tamarind, Australian pines, gumbo-limbo, and century plants.

The native flora is tropical, mainly mangrove (or buttonwood), bay cedar, sea-grape, sea-lavender, purslane, and sea-oats—all typical of Florida's lower east coast.

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U.S. Department of the Interior • National Park Service

About your visit. Public transportation from Key West is available by boat and amphibious aircraft. Information on charter boats can be obtained from the Key West Chamber of Commerce. For information about charter flights contact Chalk's Flying Service, P.O. Box 726, Buena Vista Station, Miami, FL 33137.

Private boaters have a prime opportunity to visit the fort. You can buy nautical charts for the route at marinas and boating supply outlets in Key West. Information can be obtained in Key West from the U.S. Coast Guard Station, the Chamber of Commerce, and the Charter Boat Association. Boaters should be aware of the possibility of extremely rough seas.

Seaplane approaches, landings, takeoffs, mooring, and docking are limited to the area within 1 mile of the fort itself. In summer, seaplanes must stay beyond 100 yards off Bush Key, which supports a nesting tern colony.

The fort is open during daylight hours. Upon arrival, see the orientation slide pro-

gram, which explains the significance of the fort; then take the self-guiding tour. **Remember that the fort is old and the mortar may be loose between the bricks in places, so do not stand near the edges of the higher elevations. It is particularly dangerous to allow children to play or wander about unattended within the fort.**

If you decide to go snorkeling, look for patches of live coral, around which the various forms of marine life will be concentrated. A novice swimmer can explore the fascinating coral wonderland in only 3 or 4 feet of water. With scuba, experienced individuals can explore the deeper areas. The coral formations and brilliant tropical fish provide excellent opportunities for underwater photography. Remember that collecting, spearfishing, or disturbing natural features in the monument is not permitted.

Salt-water sport fishing is good most of the year and no fishing license is required. Regulations can be obtained from personnel stationed at the fort. Park rangers can also direct you to interesting points in the area.

Since the Dry Tortugas are isolated, you must provide for your own existence; no housing, water, meals, or supplies are available.

Camping is permitted in the grassed picnic area; grills and picnic tables are provided.

No bathing facilities are available.

Administration • Fort Jefferson National Monument is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. Address inquiries to the Superintendent, Everglades National Park, Box 279, Homestead, FL 33030.

Department of the Interior • As the Nation's principal conservation agency, the Department of the Interior has basic responsibilities for water, fish, wildlife, mineral, land, park, and recreational resources. Indian and Territorial affairs are other major concerns of America's "Department of Natural Resources." The Department works to assure the wisest choice in managing all our resources so each will make its full contribution to a better United States—now and in the future.