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THE GIBRALTAR OF THE GULF OF MEXICO¹

by ALBERT MANUCY

A hundred years ago the United States was suffering frequent growing pains. The Louisiana and Florida cessions had uncorked the Mississippi, and the hardy pioneers of its valley were floating tons of produce down-river to New Orleans. From that growing port Yankee merchantman, flying Dutchman, and British brig edged out into the Gulf Stream and headed for the narrow mouth of the Gulf where they swept through the Straits past Tortugas with the Havannah to starboard, and the two scarce thirty leagues apart.

It was Ponce de León who first found the Tortugas islands.² Waterless and barren, uninhabited save for thousands of birds and the great turtles that gave the keys their name, the Tortugas gained an unsavory if hazy reputation as a pirate nest, a tradition substantiated somewhat by the later discovery of buried silver on East Key and long guns of brass and iron on the reef.³ Nor was this tip of the Florida archipelago entirely secured to the United States until Porter and his mosquito boats finally drove the pirates from the region, a good three centuries after León's discovery. The

1. The author makes grateful acknowledgment to Mrs. Mary Sweeting Lowe, Enrique Esquinaldo, Jr., Dexter Waldo Woods, and Harper L. Garrett. Their studies furnished much of the material for this narrative. It is regretted that wartime economy permits the inclusion of essential documentation only. However, comprehensive references are available in National Park Service files. Correspondence regarding them should be addressed to the Coordinating Superintendent, Southeastern National Monuments, St. Augustine, Florida.
2. The most accessible account of the discovery is in T. F. Davis, "History of Juan Ponce de León's Voyage to Florida", *Florida Historical Quarterly*, XIV, 1.
3. J. B. Holder, "The Dry Tortugas", *Harper's Magazine*, July 1868, p. 260.

lighthouse built in 1825 on Garden Key, the central isle of Tortugas, was a significant mark of progress – tangible recognition of the importance of the isolated group to the commerce of an expanding nation.

Jackson was president when the Navy strategists marked their maps with black flags to show British bases in the West Indian area and began to call Tortugas the “Key to the Mexican Gulf,” the logical spot for the bottom link in the chain of coastal forts from Maine to the Mississippi. Lt. Josiah Tattnall, who in 1829 surveyed the keys in the U. S. sloop *Florida*, wrote strong words: “A naval force, designed to control the navigation of the Gulf, could desire no better position than . . . the Tortugas . . . And there can be do doubt that an adversary, in possession of large naval means [*i. e.*, Great Britain], would, with great advantage, make these harbors his habitual resort . . . [But] defence of these harbors would . . . transfer to our own squadron, even should it be inferior, these most valuable positions; and it would afford a point of refuge to our navy and our commerce at the very spot where it would be most necessary and useful.”⁴

In other words, it was a dog-in-the-manger proposition. The U. S. had to fortify to keep the islands out of enemy hands, for this location was ideal for an aggressor who wanted to cut the lifeline between the Mississippi and the Atlantic seaboard. Ironically enough, during the great blockade of the Confederacy, Tortugas was useful to the Union for just that reason.

The fortification at Tortugas was to be more than a defense for a strategic harbor. It was, wrote Gen. Winfield Scott, “wholly national, being of far

4. *Report of the House Committee on Military Affairs*, 28 Cong. 1 sess., v. II, Report 407, pp. 1-19.

greater value even to the most distant parts of the Atlantic coast and to the people on the upper waters of the upper Missouri, Mississippi, and Ohio rivers than to the State of Florida.”⁵ Moreover the fort was to be a partial answer to problems recognized by the Monroe Doctrine. United States citizens looked with mixed feelings toward the boiling pot of Latin-American independence. “The unsettled condition of the governments of the former [Spanish] provinces on the Gulf of Mexico,” wrote the Secretary of the Navy, “requires that our trade in the interior of that gulf should be protected by a suitable naval force.”⁶

And free Texas, increasingly impatient with United States scruples against annexation, was negotiating with European Powers for recognition and protection. Paradoxically enough, even the Far West entered the strategical picture, for the dream of a Central American railway, soon to be realized, showed the Gulf to be an important link in communication with the Oregon Territory.

When James Polk was elected president, the die was cast for expansion. Events moved rapidly. In the election month of 1844, Capt. J. G. Barnard made a reconnaissance of fortification sites on the Florida reef. On February 18, 1845, Congress voted for the annexation of Texas. On March 3 the Territory of Florida became a state and in July Florida's legislature cleared the way for transfer of strategic lands to the Federal government. Before the year was out a board of survey definitely selected Tortugas as a fortification site and on September 17, 1845, President Polk by executive order made the Tortugas a military reservation.

5. *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies during the War of the Rebellion* (Washington, 1883-1902), Series I, v. 1, p. 112.

6. *Pensacola Gazette*, Apr. 2, 1842.

Maj. Hartman Bache completed a topographical survey early in 1846— the year of the Mexican War.⁷

To hold the tiny islands of Tortugas, the War Department conceived an American Gibraltar. Under the supervision of the Army's Chief Engineer Joseph G. Totten, young Lt. Montgomery C. Meigs drew the plans for a mighty six-sided fort, three tiers high.⁸ It was to be a super-fortification of 250 guns, manned by a wartime garrison of 1,500 men. Through the gun rooms of one tier alone would be a half mile stroll. And for thirty years the engineers, the slaves, the Irish laborers and the craftsmen worked to materialize this dream of another Gibraltar.

The start was made in December 1846 when a second lieutenant of the U. S. Engineer Corps reached the eight islands.⁹ Garden Key, proposed site of the fort, was barely three feet above sea level, a rough oval about three hundred yards long covered with mangrove and buttonwood. There was a stagnant pond in the middle. The lighthouse stood near the shore. Key West, the nearest civilization, lay almost seventy miles eastward. True, it was a "naval depot," but it was hardly more than a little fishing village whose daring wreckers already had a reputation.

That the beginning of a great fortification should be entrusted to a young officer hardly out of West Point may seem peculiar, but Horatio Gouverneur

7. Barnard to Engineer Dept., Nov 14, 1844; J. B. McCrellis, *Military Reservations, National Military Parks, and National Cemeteries. Title and Jurisdiction* (Washington, 1898) pp. 25-26; Executive Order, Sept. 17, 1845; Welcker to Dutton, Feb. 2, 1846 (in the Key West Barracks Records of Fort Jefferson, hereafter cited as KW).

8. "Projected Fort for Garden Kay [*sic*], Tortugas", June 9, 1846 (U. S. Engineer Dept., Washington, Drawer 74, Sheet 2).

9. Fort Jefferson Quarterly Returns, 1846, voucher 60 (KW).

Wright was no ordinary young man.¹⁰ Besides, most of the ranking officers were busy at the moment fighting the Mexicans.

Wright brought two Yankees like himself in his schooner. Jeremiah Peabody knocked a shelter together while Wright and George Phillips, the mason laid out sites for temporary buildings to house the work gangs and materials. Meantime, in New Hampshire a firm was actually prefabricating these structures and was to bring out the sawed lumber and put everything up inside of sixty days. It sounded easy, but a good year went by before Wright had his wooden shacks.¹¹

The first permanent work began in the fall of 1847 when a score of slaves started digging the foundations for the three-storied officers' quarters, where were to be living quarters and office space for the Engineer.¹² Two years later in February Wright began construction of the moat wall, which for this great marine fort served the double purpose of protecting the main walls against the pounding of the sea, and enclosing a deep, unfordable ditch that discouraged assault.¹³

The year 1850 was an eventful one. It marked the advent of a nameless fever. A storm drove away the fever— and damaged the work. And on

10. Wright is perhaps best remembered for his heroic defense of Washington, when in 1864 the Confederates made a daring attempt to take the Capital. On this occasion, in spite of Gen. Wright's repeated remonstrances, President Lincoln exposed himself to enemy fire by standing on the parapet of Fort Stevens to watch the Confederate attack. Only after a surgeon by his side was wounded did the President take cover.
11. Monthly Report of Operations, Dec. 1846 (KW); Annual Report of Operations, 1847 (KW); Vennard to Wright, Nov. 3, 1847 (KW).
12. Monthly Reports of Operations, 1847.
13. *Id.*, 1849; Wright to Totten, July 27, 1848 (Engineer Office files, Washington, W794. Hereafter only call letters in this archive will be cited).

November 4, 1850, the "Fort at Garden Kay" [*sic*] was formally named for Thomas Jefferson.¹⁴

Early next spring the first concrete was poured for the foundations of the main walls.¹⁵ It was slow and difficult work. Virtually all foundations were five feet below water, and Engineer Corps knowledge of submarine construction was frankly in the experimental stage. Wright used a cofferdam, with windmill- and steam-powered pumps to remove the water from his foundation ditch. Immense amounts of materials were required to lay the foundation—fourteen feet wide and two feet thick.¹⁶ Fortunately there was plenty of sand and coral debris on nearby islands for the mortar.

Slaves were the backbone of the labor gang, sweating in the broiling sun, sloshing in the tepid water, digging the foundations for the ponderous walls, dumping barrow after barrow of mortar into the forms. There were usually a good two dozen or more of them at the Fort, hired to the Government by their Key West owners. The first Negroes arrived May 26, 1847. That first summer, seven slipped aboard a schooner and disappeared into the Gulf, only to be picked up a few days later by a passing vessel and returned to Key West. But most of the colored contingent seemed fairly contented. From time to time they were on "furlough" to Key West, or were gratified with "delicacies" sent them by their masters. An occasional hiding took care of petty thievery and such. Originally Wright contracted to pay the owners \$20 per month per slave and furnish rations, shelter and medical care, but the increas-

14. Whitehurst to Wright, Aug. 23 and Sept. 9, 1850 (KW); General Order No. 38, Nov. 4, 1850.

15. Monthly Reports of Operations, 1851.

16. [Totten] to Fraser, [draft], [c. May 1846] (KW); Totten to Wright, Mar. 22, 1849 (KW); Wright to Totten, Apr. 5, 1849 (W840).

ingly delicate question of using slave labor on Government work was compromised after 1855 with establishment of a basic pay of \$1.12 a day with rations and lodging for both white and colored labor. In the case of the slaves, however, the wage money was still paid to the masters. Wealthy James Filor of Key West, who had seventeen chattels at the work in 1859, received as much as \$478 a month in wages earned by his "boys." The influential Senator S. R. Mallory also had slaves employed at Fort Jefferson.

Good white labor was scarce. Practically all the skilled workmen and the laborers were northerners (many of them Irish) and in the enervating tropical climate it took two men to do the work of one. Nor was there anything to attract good workers ; not even high wages. Above the laborer's pay, wages ranged from \$1.50 and \$2 for skilled workmen to \$3 a day for master workmen. The men toiled ten hours a day, six days a week.¹⁷ Between times there was little to do except fish, gig crawfish, or hunt the big turtles by moonlight. True, some of the officers and men became interested in the wildlife around them, and many friends up north were delighted with tropical gifts that might include the purple sea fan or several delicately hued seashells.

Wright early had trouble with the fishermen and wreckers, many of whom he described as lawless and immoral characters who flouted his authority. A minor problem was the sale of liquor by these unwelcome visitors to men on' the job. Wright's major concern, however, was with establishment of a quarantine, since fishing smacks constantly

17. Wright to Totten, June 1 (W717) and July 21 (W726); Whitehurst to Wright, July 12, 1847 (KW); Moreno to Woodbury, Feb. 25, 1858 (KW); Quarterly Return, May 1859, and Time Rolls (KW).

made trips to Havana or other ports where yellow fever prevailed.¹⁸ Materials were hard to get. Most Gulf freighters were too busy handling cotton to risk carrying brick to Jefferson and then sailing light to the next cargo port, hundreds of miles away. Dozens of vessels suffered in the vicious seas approaching the fort— four were lost in the first few years. A great deal of the purchasing was done through the New York agency of the Engineer Department though the Engineer at the fort handled many matters himself. Early in 1847 Wright was buying lumber, iron and other supplies in Mobile. The first contract with a southern brickyard was not placed until 1853, but from that year until the Civil War, companies in Pensacola, Mobile, New Orleans, Charleston and Savannah pressed millions of bricks for both Fort Jefferson and the fortifications at Key West. Southern brick was preferable not only on account of its larger size, but because it withstood the climate better than the northern product first obtained. Of all the companies, Bacon and Abercrombie of Pensacola proved to be the mainstay. Good bricks could be had elsewhere, but only from this firm were the engineers able to get a sufficient supply at stated intervals— at the reasonable cost delivered of \$21 per thousand. Cement came from New York; granite was shipped all the way from New England quarries.¹⁹

Ten years went by— it was 1856— and the fort walls barely showed above the harbor waters.²⁰ Nevertheless, yeoman work had been done, the foundations were laid. Wright's successor had but to finish the fifty-foot walls and build the hundreds of

18. Wright to Totten, Apr. 23, 1847 (W704).

19. See the Annual and Monthly Reports of Operations; the Material and Accounts Payable Books (KW); and numerous letters (KW).

20. Annual Report of Operations, 1856.

gunrooms – a staggering assignment of extremely complicated brickmasonry. To do it, the Engineer Corps picked another Yankee, Capt. Daniel Phineas Woodbury of New Hampshire.

Tropical isolation had no great appeal for Dan Woodbury. But he was an authority on arch construction (one of his monographs was then due for publication) and Gen. Totten kept him on the Tortugas station until the major part of the masonry work was finished.²¹ To faithful George Phillips, chief overseer and master mason, must likewise go much of the credit for the superb brick arches in the giant fortification.

It was during Woodbury's administration that Louis Agassiz came to Fort Jefferson. "It almost repays us for our long banishment," wrote Capt. Woodbury, "to see and hear so much from the first naturalist of the time . . ." ²² Certainly Agassiz left a lasting impression upon the inhabitants, for the records of the Smithsonian Institution show that thenceforward many choice specimens of bird life came to the museum from the builders at Tortugas.²³

On the eve of the Civil War, the fort was nearly half finished. A million and a quarter dollars had been spent. Woodbury said it would take that much again to finish the job.²⁴

But though they did not yet fully realize it, the engineers had lost their battle. The fort was beginning to sink under the weight of each new brick that the masons put on. The island was literally slipping from beneath the gigantic mass of masonry.

21. *Id.*, 1856-1860; Thayer to Woodbury, June 12, 1856 (KW).

22. Woodbury to Hunt, Mar. 19, 1858 (KW).

23. P. Bartsch, "Bird Rookeries of the Tortugas", *Annual Report of the Smithsonian Institution*, 1917 (Washington, 1919).

24. Statements showing the condition of the work, June 30 and Sept. 30, 1860 (KW); "Estimate of the Cost of Completing the Fort Proper from July 1, 1859" (KW).

Ominous cracks appeared in the walls. Wright had early made subsidence tests. He built a table carrying a load of brick theoretically equivalent to twice the weight of the completed wall. The table went down only 9/16 of an inch. As actual construction got under way, Wright's search for the elusive "bedrock" led him to the wondering conclusion that the Washington engineers had planned to build this fort on sand! The Department made adjustments in foundation design, but saw no cause for alarm. It was not until certain foundations sank three inches within six months that definitive subsoil experiments were made. They revealed no solid rock within 80 feet of sea level.²⁵ What the engineers had thought to be a coral island was nothing more than a heap of shell and coral sand, cast up by powerful ocean currents. There was no way to stop the fort from sinking into the sea. Moreover, in a year or so artillerymen were to prove at Port Pulaski that 8-foot brick walls were obsolete as a defense against the new rifled cannon.

Still, the work went on.

Capt. Montgomery Meigs, the very man who had drawn the plans for the fort, was detailed to the fort in 1860. His trip to Tortugas took him overland through many of the southern states. "The temper of the South is excited— is dangerous," he wrote to Gen. Scott. Fort Jefferson had, he continued, "not a single gun, and I doubt whether among the seventy or eighty persons, white & black, employed or permitted on the island half a dozen fowling pieces could be found."²⁶ Scott saw the danger. "There is . . . not a soldier in Fort Jefferson to resist a handfull of filibusters or a

25. Annual Reports of Operations, 1851, 1853, 1855, 1859; Holgate to McFarland, May 3, 1864, Letterbook 1862-1880 (KW).

26. Meigs to Scott, Nov. 10, 1860 (M3765).

rowboat of pirates, and the Gulf," he predicted, "will swarm with such nuisances."²⁷

With the fighting words of the South ringing in his ears, Meigs hastily closed the gaps in the walls left by workmen for bringing in materials, built a drawbridge for the sally port, and transformed the sprawling mass of unfinished masonry into a citadel. But it was a citadel without guns. And every day the rumors that Florida forces were coming to seize the defenseless fort came closer to reality. Good reason there was to fear an early attempt on the fort. Several successful seizures of coastal fortifications were reported, and the *U.S.S. Wyandotte*, in dry dock at Pensacola, had likewise fallen into Confederate hands.

One January day in 1861, a sheriff sailed into the harbor. He brought news Meigs feared: Florida had seceded from the Union. At the fort, there were 30 men who would stand for the Union in case of attack. Meigs sent a smack boiling to Fort Taylor at Key West for cannon.²⁸

Next morning, January 19, 1861, a big steamer hove to off the reef. She showed no colors. Watching her small boat coming into the harbor, Capt. Meigs fully expected a summons from the Confederates. Instead came word that the transport brought Maj. L. G. Arnold of the U. S. Army and 66 artillerymen all the way from Boston harbor. And there were guns. Meigs heaved a sigh of relief. "The work is now secure to the United States," he wrote fervently, "and I trust that its flag once raised upon these walls will never again be lowered."²⁹

Every fort has a traditional story, and the tale about the Confederate privateer has probably been

27. *Official Records*, *loc. cit.*

28. *Id.*, Series I, v. 52, pt. 1, pp. 2-3, 5.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

told for more than one seacoast defense. The "Little General", as Maj. Arnold was called, speedily began mounting his guns. One afternoon, as he was anxiously supervising the working of his very first carriage, an armed privateer appeared off the fort and a message came ashore demanding the surrender of the fort to the State of Florida. While the courier waited outside, the officer of the guard brought the note to Arnold. The peppery Little General rushed to a gun port. "Tell your captain," he roared at the startled messenger, "I will blow his ship out of the water if he is not gone from here in ten minutes!" The bluff worked. The schooner was soon blending with the horizon.³⁰

Correspondence at the outset of the civil conflict shows the great value which Federal officers attached to Fort Jefferson. Even Col. Harvey Brown, who during the spring of 1861 stopped at Fort Jefferson to augment his forces on the way to reinforce Fort Pickens at Pensacola, was instructed to be "careful not to reduce too much the means of the fortresses in the Florida Reef, as they are deemed of greater importance than even Fort Pickens . . ." ³¹ And Brown himself cautioned Maj. Arnold: "The importance of Fort Jefferson can hardly be overestimated . . . Your fort may not improperly be considered the Gibraltar of America . . ." ³²

Dozens of big guns and plenty of reinforcement came to the fort. It was manned by over 1,000 men in 1862 (though the average wartime garrison was only about 500).³³ There were 68 guns at Jefferson when the bombardment of Sumter began; when Apomattox came, the fort mounted 89 pieces; 15 in

30. J. H. Shinn, *Fort Jefferson and Its Commander* (Governor's Island, 1910), pp. 19-20.

31. *Official Records*, Series I, v. 1, p. 366.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 377.

33. *Id.*, Series I, v. 34, pt. 4, p. 277; Brown to Finley, Apr. 1, 1862, Letterbook 1858-1865 (KW).

barbette atop the fort, 8 in the second tier, and 66 in the lower tier. Some of the ordnance soon became useless, however. The Columbiad barbettes in the bastions, for example, were on wooden platforms that soon rotted. One day the gunners tried one. It capsized at the third fire.³⁴

Construction continued. During the war Garden Key became a Devil's Island as men and more men came to Fort Jefferson. One garrison after another was relieved after a few months' service; there were Regulars, Zouaves, Volunteers and Colored Troops—there were men from New Hampshire and New York and Pennsylvania, infantry, artillery, bandsmen, doctors and engineers. And there were the prisoners. The commandant was hard put to find quarters for the 1,400 people who crowded the fortification at the peak of wartime activity. The shack outside the fort was jammed with workmen.³⁵ Prisoners and soldiers alike, shutting out the weather with rough lumber, slept in unfinished gun rooms. Building barracks and quarters was pushed as rapidly as possible with a few bricks that could be had. Maine ran out of them in 1863.

Much of the fort was finished during the war years. By the end of 1862, most, if not all the walls were up to the full height of 50 feet. At the base, these massive bulwarks were 10 feet thick, tapering to an 8-foot breadth a few feet above the foundation. Yellow, handmade bricks, pressed and hard-burned, were used to face the outside. And behind the main walls were the heavy bombproof arches of the gunrooms, supported on huge piers in which drains were fashioned to carry rainwater

34. *Official Records*, Series I, v. 1, p. 377; Annual Report of Operations, 1864; Monthly Reports of Operations, May, June 1865; Frost to Delafield, July 31, 1865, Letterbook 1862-1880.

35. See especially Letterbooks, 1858-1865, 1862-1880; Prisoners' Roll Book (KW); and Daily Report Books (KW).

from the roof of the fort down into the cisterns under the gunrooms.

By 1863 several magazines and a hot shot furnace were done. The barbette magazines on the top of the fort were basically finished late the next year. On the parade inside the fort, construction of soldiers' barracks and completion of the officers' quarters were commenced in 1863 and were well along at the end of the war.³⁶ In that same fateful year of 1865 the engineers conceded their failure: the Department ordered a halt in construction of the second tier.³⁷ To this day the unfinished embrasures gape darkly in the yellow walls.

Slaves were used at the fort until they were freed in 1863, and the Northern troops fraternized with the Negroes and put new ideas into impressionable minds. Mingo took the Yankee doctrine to heart. With the New Hampshire boys at his back, he was saucy to the overseer. Poor Mingo was at once clapped into an empty powder magazine— an excellent dungeon. A few days later, when the overseer was taking Mingo his meal, the officer of the guard and several of his detail rushed to the scene. Their side arms bristled and there were shouts of "Lock him up ! Put him in and see how *he* likes it !"³⁸ The overseer simply complained to the commandant. Mingo stayed in the dungeon— until he saw the light.

Prisoners eventually replaced the slaves and even most of the paid white labor. The first contingent, 33 of them, came in September 1861. And as the war dragged on the fort became notorious as a military prison— "the terrible Dry Tortugas." In 1864 President Lincoln increased the prison roster by

36. Monthly Reports of Operations, 1862-1866; Annual Reports of Operations, 1863-1866.

37. McFarland to McAlester, Jan. 31, 1865, Letterbook 1862-1880.

38. Phillips to McFarland, May 28, 1862 (KW); also Pearsall to McFarland, same date (KW).

mitigating the death sentences of deserters to "imprisonment at the Dry Tortugas."³⁹

One of the unfortunates was "Fat Charley." Charley's colonel at Bull Run ordered him to retreat. So he had retreated to Vermont, where, finding that the regiment had not followed, he sat down to await further orders.

It was Charley who conceived the idea of converting the shallow, unfinished moat into an aquarium. Food turtles were kept there, so why not other specimens? He got a 10-foot "man-eating" shark over the wall, and next he proposed to put on a feeding show. The soldiers watched with excitement. Would the shark turn belly up to seize his food? Snaring one of the sundry cats on the island, Fat Charley hurled this tempting morsel into the water before the nose of the "man-eater." The shark turned tail in great fright. Pussy bravely swam the length of the moat, clutched a rope let down from a prison window above, and with three cheers from the onlookers, she was hauled up to find refuge among deserters and bounty-jumpers.

The shark, named "Provost Marshal" by the soldiers, lived for about two months and was said to have "inspired with a wholesome terror many of the inmates of this great prison."⁴⁰

Most of the convicts were put under the engineers at hard labor tasks such as digging the moat, and naturally, many of them were more trouble than they were worth. Unloading a freighter, they sabotaged thousands of the precious bricks; assigned to a job, they slipped away and even on little Garden Key managed to keep out of sight; a lot of them did not even report for work.⁴¹

39. General Order no. 76, Feb. 26, 1864; Time Roll Book 1859-1861 (KW).

40. Holder, *op. cit.*, p. 262.

41. See especially Letterbook 1862-1880, pp. 322-323.

It was on July 24, 1865, that the young country doctor from Maryland stepped onto the wharf in front of the fort.⁴² Dr. Samuel A. Mudd was the physician who treated John Booth's leg, fractured when that assassin leaped from Lincoln's box at Ford's theatre. Booth was disguised when he found the doctor's home on that eventful night, and Mudd, ignorant of the tragedy, gave him shelter for a few hours until he again resumed his flight. Dr. Mudd was charged with knowledge of the conspiracy, convicted and sentenced to life imprisonment at hard labor. With him on the wharf at Tortugas were Michael O'Loughlin, Samuel Arnold and Edward Spangler. Others of the alleged conspirators were hanged.

Escape from this isolated Tortugas prison, miles from civilization, would seem impossible but in fact prison breaks were not uncommon. Mudd told his wife he had passed up several chances to get away, because, he thought, flight would amount to a confession of guilt.

Then came the Negro troops of the 82nd Infantry. Mudd found it unbearable to be prisoner to what he called "unbleached humanity", so one September day he walked out of the fort and into the hold of the U. S. transport *Thomas A. Scott*, where he hid under some loose planks. The soldiers found him within ten minutes, escorted him to the guardhouse, and locked irons on his hands and feet. He was doomed to stay in irons for months, and whenever a ship was docked, he went back to the "dungeon". He lost the job of hospital steward and was put to cleaning old brick. "I worked hard all day," he recorded with wry humor, "and came very near finishing one brick."⁴³

42. N. Mudd (ed.), *The Life of Dr. Samuel A. Mudd* (N. Y. and Washington, 1906), p. 115.

43. *Id.*, p. 121; also see pp. 113 ff., 127-129.

A young sailor named Henry Kelly had helped to hide the doctor, and he too was put in irons. "The Major," Kelly is said to have boasted, "is a fool if he thinks he can keep me here." Somehow he got free of his shackles and broke out the barred barrier to freedom. It was an easy matter for this escape artist to steal a small boat and vanish into the Gulf. With Kelly went a thief named "Smith". Together the two men were bold enough to rob the post sutler of money, clothing and supplies for their contemplated voyage. Their flight was an example for another brazen escape a fortnight later, when at high noon three convicts took a boat from under the very eyes of the guard. The fugitives were three leagues from the fort before the loss was discovered. Then the observation was made that it was useless to pursue!⁴⁴

Not all attempts, however, were so successful. A "very hard case" named J. W. Adare once slipped through a gun embrasure, crossed the moat and, accompanied by a Negro prisoner, swam a plank across three miles of shark-infested water to Loggerhead Key, where he stole a lighthouse boat and sailed to Cuba. At Havana, being short of funds, Adare endeavored to sell his companion into slavery. The Negro, naturally enough, failed to see the justice of such a negotiation, and his loud complaints returned both of them to Tortugas. Again Adare aspired to a freer field. In spite of ball and chain he navigated his plank a second time to Loggerhead. This time a corporal's guard brought him back.⁴⁵

At the outset of 1866 Mudd painted an unusually depressing word picture of prisoner conditions. "I

44. *Ibid.*

45. "Thirty Months at the Dry Tortugas", *The Galaxy Miscellany* [Magazine], Feb. 1869, pp. 286-287. This source will be cited hereafter as *Galaxy*.

am beginning," he wrote, "to realize the saying of the Psalmist— 'I have grown old in my youth,' etc. Imagine one loaded down with heavy chains, locked up in a wet, damp room, twelve hours out of every twenty-four during working days, and all day on Sundays and holidays. No exercise allowed except in the limited space of a small room, and with irons on. The atmosphere we breathe is highly impregnated with sulphuric hydrogen gas . . . highly injurious to health as well as disagreeable. The gas is generated by the numerous sinks that empty into that portion of the sea enclosed by the breakwater, and which is immediately under a small port hole—the only admission for air and light we have from the external port. My legs and ankles are swollen and sore, pains in my shoulders and back are frequent. My hair began falling out some time ago . . . My eyesight is beginning to grow very bad, so much so that I can't read or write by candlelight With all this, imagine my gait with a bucket and broom, and a guard, walking around from one corner of the fort to another, sweeping and sanding down the bastions. This has been our treatment for the last three months, coupled with bad diet, bad water, and every inconvenience."⁴⁶

Finally Dr. Mudd found himself sharing less uncomfortable quarters with four congenial men. Three of them were his fellow "conspirators", Arnold, O'Loughlin and Spangler. The fourth was a soldier of fortune named Col. George St. Leger Grenfel, an aging Englishman who had been right hand man to the Confederate raider John Morgan. Grenfel was something of a mystery, and the mystery was deepened when one stormy March night he disappeared, along with the sentry guarding the

46. Mudd, pp. 161-162.

boats and three other prisoners, including the irrepressible *Adare*.

By midsummer of 1867 the prisoners had dwindled in number to less than 50 men. There were four companies of the 5th Artillery and a small engineer force working on the barracks— about 400 people altogether. Life was not altogether pleasant. The fortnightly arrival of the New Orleans steamer with mail and supplies, and the schooner every week from Key West, roused the inhabitants from their “usual condition of torpid monotony” by providing relief from the dull routine of drills, roll calls, guard mounts, dress parades and the like. The post boasted a well stocked library and there was occasionally a chaplain to hold religious services. But these attractions paled beside the universally popular amateur theatre which for perfection lacked only “a real live woman” to personate the female characters.⁴⁸

Fort Jefferson was regarded as a healthful post. Epidemic sickness had been recorded from time to time, but had never reached serious proportions. Yet the hospital always harbored cases of mild fever, dysentery and diarrhea, especially among the prisoners. And small wonder. Practically the only fresh food came from the sea. Beef cattle were usually brought from Punta Rassa, near Tampa, Florida. After a week’s passage in the hold of a schooner, they were unloaded on a small barren island near the fort and fed with dry forage. Under such conditions a full grown bullock seldom dressed 300 pounds. Even under the most favorable conditions, rations of fresh meat were limited to three issues in ten days. Mudd recorded several complaints about dessicated food,

47. *Id.*, pp. 136 ff.; Letterbook 1866-1870, p. 94 (KW); *Galaxy*, p. 287.

48. *Id.*, pp. 284-286.

and intimated that prisoners' fare was worse than that for the garrison. The ration records, however, show no discrimination. A typical list of provisions included beef, ham, pork, cans of lobster, clams and oysters, flour, corn meal, hominy, beans, rice, dried apples, cans of milk and potatoes, corn, tomatoes, peas, onions, assorted cans of preserves, syrup and molasses, brown and white sugar, salt, pepper, vinegar, ketchup, hops and lard. Very prominent in such lists are quantities of coffee and tobacco. Despite apparent variety on paper, actually the diet was monotonous. Cases of scurvy were not uncommon.⁴⁹ Occasionally watermelons, bananas and pineapples were brought in from Cuba – at extravagant prices, but a “good head of plain vulgar cabbage, so little esteemed in the outside world,” wrote one soldier, “would sell readily for a dollar here.”⁵⁰

In addition to usual vicissitudes and notwithstanding the previous health record at Tortugas, every summer the threat of yellow fever hung like a pall over the fort. The very mention of the “scourge” terrified these men in the tropics. Once a fever-ridden vessel came into the quarantine. All of her crew were stricken, but there was not one volunteer nurse from Garden Key.⁵¹ The “black vomit” that marked the fatal case, the yellowed skin of the unfortunate victim— these things did not bother the brave man so much as the uncertainty of when or where yellow jack would strike.

49. Commissary Book 1861-1868, pp. 416-431 (KW); Report of Board of Officers, Dec. 16, 1867 (encl., Townsend to Chief of Engineers, July 7, 1868, files of the Adjutant General's Office, to be cited hereafter as AGO).

50. *Galaxy*, p. 285.

51. Mudd, p. 115.

It came on the night of August 18, 1867.⁵² The evidence points to Capt. George Crabbe as the man who unknowingly brought the disease from Havana. But Major Joseph Smith, the post surgeon, blamed it on the stinking miasma rising from the shallow and stagnant moat, where the sewers emptied. Mudd was one of the prisoners detailed to board up the gun ports over the moat.

The fever spread. Dr. Smith died on September 8; his little son Harry soon followed him. Those in the fort were panic-stricken. Their doctor was gone—the scourge was spreading. Word came to Sam Mudd. The chains were forgotten. Once again he was Doctor Mudd, the only man who could help.

Old Dr. Daniel Whitehurst sailed from Key West to take charge, and side by side the two medicos worked day and night in a long, uphill fight to relieve their burning, retching patients. The hospital nurses, the laundresses—even the Negro prisoner-orderlies fell sick. Out of six officers, five died. The worst night was September 16, when half of Company M took the fever. Some thirty men, in beds side by side, were attacked between eleven and one o'clock that night, and within forty-eight hours every soldier in M Company was sick.

For three long, hot months the epidemic raged. Almost every man felt yellow jack's fetid breath. Mudd himself had a touch of fever. Out of 270 cases, there were 38 deaths. Wrote Mudd: "No more respect is shown the dead . . . than the putrid remains of a dead dog. The burial party are al-

52. Source materials for the 1867 epidemic, though abundant, are mainly the observations of one man: Dr. Mudd. In addition to Mudd, especially pp. 254-302, see the contemporary letters in the Whitehurst Papers, collection of Mrs. J. V. Keen, Tallahassee, Fla.; Report of Board of Officers cited *ante*, n. 49; Letterbook 1866-1870, p. 71; Post Order Book 1867-1868 (KW); and *Galaxy*, pp. 285, 287.

lowed a drink of whiskey both before and after the burying, which infuses a little more life in them. They move quickly, and in half an hour after a man dies, he is put in a coffin, nailed down, rowed a mile to an adjacent island, the grave dug, covered up, and the party returned, in the best of humor, for their drinks."⁵³ But one burial party, a corporal and three guardhouse prisoners, deserted en masse.

When it finally ended, the doctors and many others were heroes. The garrison petitioned for the release of Dr. Mudd, and Commandant Valentine Stone, who had lost his wife and was sorrowfully on his way north with his two-year-old son, had told Mudd that he was going to try to arrange a pardon; but fever overtook the unlucky major on his way to Key West, and Mudd went back to his cell. Meanwhile, Mudd's energetic wife had been storming the Washington strongholds, and on March 11, 1869, the doctor finally left Fort Jefferson with a pardon signed by President Johnson. Back home to Charles County he went, and there, 14 years later, he died in harness.

A half dozen years after the 1867 epidemic, on a breathless, sweltering day, the scourge walked again in the echoing galleries of the fort. As Commandant James Bell— who was himself doomed to die— realized that new tragedy was impending, he ordered all the well people except a few volunteer nurses out of the fort. Hastily they rowed to distant Loggerhead Key— but a few had to be brought back.

It was a terribly personal epidemic for the two doctors: Dr. Porter's⁵⁴ child was a fever ease; distracted Dr. Gould had four of his brood burning

53. Mudd, pp. 270-271.

54. Dr. J. Y. Porter, who later became a widely known public health officer in Florida.

with the disease at the same time. Yet none was more brave than Henry Campbell, a Negro life-terminer. Henry did everything—nursed the sick, burned bedding, helped with the coffins— and laughed at the fever.

And when at the end of it all, Private M'Cormack took little Marie Horner's fever-wasted hand to start the long trip to her Indiana grandpa, the child could look across the water to a dozen new graves on Sand Key. In two of them were her father and mother, both of them hospital workers.⁵⁵

Another hurricane was the final discouragement. Troops left the fort in January 1874. "There is not the slightest probability in my opinion of this fortification being completed within the next fifty years," wrote the last commandant.⁵⁶

In spite of this accurate and gloomy prognostication, the story was not yet done. "I would finish it up," said Gen. Sherman, the man who marched through Georgia.⁵⁷

But it was the end of an era. While the ordnance sergeant left at the fort pattered through the long days brushing the rust from his 140 cannon, shifting the 800 barrels of powder, and watching the ranges of cannon balls sink deeper into the parade, while a handful of engineer workmen were busy repairing the storm damage and mounting big 15-inch smoothbores on the top deck, the Engineer Corps was marking time, memorizing the lessons it had learned, digesting new developments in the art of war as practiced by the Europeans.

It was Horatio Wright, now Chief Engineer of the Corps, who stated the defense problem facing

55. Bell to Asst. Adjutant General, Sept. 5, 1873, and Langdon to Asst. Adj. Gen., Sept 20, 1873, Letterbook 1872-1873 (KW).

56. *Ibid.* See also Dagenfield to Deputy Quartermaster, Feb. 26, 1874, Letterbook 1865-1902 (KW).

57. *House Reports*, 43 Cong. 1 sess., v. 2, Report 384.

the maturing nation, spread now from Atlantic to Pacific. "With old casemated works (than which there were none better in the world in their day)," Gen. Wright pointed out, with perhaps a touch of nostalgia for his fort on Garden Key, "designed long before the introduction of the 800 to 2,000 pounder rifled guns into modern warfare; without iron armor or shields, and but partially armed . . . with new ones for modern guns and mortars but partially built and rapidly being destroyed by the elements . . . with gun batteries without guns, and mortar batteries without mortars . . . we can make but a feeble defense against the powerful fleets now prepared and rapidly increasing which will sooner or later be brought against us by some of the most powerful maritime nations on the earth, or by others nearer at hand whose offensive naval means exceed our own, and whose powers are not to be despised."⁵⁸

During the decade of the '80's, the problem of what to do with the obsolete fortification remained unsolved. Plans for modernizing Jefferson were not completed, and if they had been, Congress, unalarmed, was on a peacetime budget. By 1886 it was unsafe to roll a barrel of Mammoth powder over the rotten wharf, and before the year was out, a hurricane removed that feature almost completely, along with most of the officers' quarters veranda and a goodly portion of the galvanized iron roofs that had been nailed on a dozen years before. And the 15-inch Rodmans might better have been back in their arsenal, for they had been hurriedly mounted during the excitement of the *Virginia* episode of 1873. Ten years of tropical weather had rotted the platforms from beneath them. The sand that "bombproofed" the roofs of the top deck

58. *Report of the Secretary of War, Chief of Engineers* (1880), v. II, pt. I, p. 18.

magazines had blown away,⁵⁹ but then modern gunners would have laughed at such anyway.

As if it were not enough for Sergeant Wilkens to watch his fort go to pieces around him, new cares came to turn his hair gray. A Mallory Line steamer churned up the harbor mud and there was a steward aboard from the Key West hospital with the news that he had a smallpox patient to inhabit one of the fort rooms. Over the sergeant's remonstrances, the crew deposited the patient on the dock. Wilkens observed that "this was not a proper place for a sick person", and bowing to the force of circumstance, he directed the steward and his pox victim to one of the shacks outside the fort.

Meanwhile, old George Phillips, here again for a few days, was bossing a gang packing away Engineer property. As the patient came ashore, the laborers jumped aboard their own vessel. Her captain began to put distance between himself and the fort. Phillips perforce chased them, but had to go all the way back to Key West for pox-proof men to finish his job.

The doctor at Key West had been rather precipitate in dispatching the smallpox case before negotiations were completed for transferring Tortugas to the Treasury Department for a quarantine station. But within the next few years was built quite an extensive station which had the distinction of being the only place within several hundred miles where a cholera-infected ship could be handled. Along with the sulphur fumigating and steam disinfecting paraphernalia were tents for the patients, an expensive new wharf and a warehouse.⁶⁰

59. See the War Secretary reports for this period; also Letter-book 1865-1902.

60. Wilkens to Asst. Adj. Gen., Apr. 30, 1889 (AGO2616); Fisk to Phillips, Feb. 25, 1889 (KW); Phillips to Fisk (two letters), Apr. 23, 1889 (KW); Sec. of War to Sec. of Treasury, June 28 1889 (AGO3234); Sec. of Treasury to Sec. of War, July 12, 1889 (AGO) and Feb. 8, 1893 (AGO3540).

It was only an interlude. The War Department was soon clamoring for the removal of the quarantine station. "The Dry Tortugas," argued Gen. Schofield, "is too valuable a military station to be surrendered for any other purpose whatever."⁶¹ By 1896 revised plans for the Tortugas defenses were under consideration.⁶²

In January 1898 the White Squadron lay in Tortugas waters. One midnight, Admiral Sicard sent a lifeboat from his flagship for Capt. Sigsbee of the *Maine*. Before long, the *Maine* washed the marl from her hook and began drifting seaward; the sailors who were rowing Capt. Sigsbee back from the Admiral's conference had to pull hard to catch her. These sailors, resting a moment before the long haul back to the New York, were the last to see the *Maine* in U. S. waters.

In spite of talk about dangerous Tortugas reefs, the Admiral decided he could do without the Key West pilot, so the man went back to his station. Then the anchors of the fleet came up. The *Texas* was hardly under way before she struck a reef and had to be sent back to Brooklyn for repairs; the *Iowa* went aground and stayed there fourteen hours while the Admiral mopped his brow and the *New York* and the *Detroit* pulled and hauled on a steel cable. Luckily there was no serious damage.

For a few days the squadron was off Key West, improving the eyes of the gunners. Then a torpedo boat came full speed alongside the flagship and maneuvers abruptly ended. The *Maine* had been blown up in Havana harbor.

The war heads went on the torpedoes. On Sunday, February 27, the White Squadron went out of

61. *Ibid.*, Gen. J. M. Schofield's endorsement of Feb. 14, 1893.

62. *Report of the Secretary of War, Chief of Engineers* (1896), v. II, pt. 1, p. 7.

existence as the seamen slapped on the black paint, and then the wartime gray. On April 22 the fleet steamed for Cuba.⁶³

Before the year was out twenty-three vessels of the U. S. Navy knew the shelter of Tortugas harbor. The Navy began dredging the channels yet deeper and started building a station to hold 20,000 tons of coal— a depot capable of coaling the heaviest battleship right at its piers, for at Key West, big ships could not then come within six miles of the naval station.⁶⁴

But coal rigs are not raised in a day, and it was fortunate that the war was soon over. The Navy Secretary wrote: "Had the war with Spain continued many months more the absence of docking facilities in these waters would have been most seriously felt, and the failure to possess such might, in a more prolonged war, seriously affect its fortunes."⁶⁵ The marines who had set up their tents on the parade at Fort Jefferson took them down again. And the Army had had enough of Dry Tortugas, for in 1900 the entire reservation was transferred to the Navy, which believed that steel and concrete would stand against the elements. A condensing plant, just completed, distilled sea water at the rate of 60,000 gallons a day, which was considerable improvement over the 7,000-gallon capacity of the two Civil War condensers. The coal storage sheds were finished in spite of trouble with the contractors, and work went ahead on the piers and rigs for dumping the coal into the bunkers of the warships. A cable boat laid a submarine line to connect Fort Jefferson with Key West. In ad-

63. Samuel Feltman to Sister Louis, n. d., Convent of Mary Immaculate, Key West, Fla.

64. *Report of the Secretary of the Navy*, Bureau of Navigation (1898), v. I, pp. 329-359; Bur. of Yards and Docks (1899), p. 219.

65. *Id.*, Bur. of Yards and Docks (1898), p. 215.

dition, wireless masts towered over the fort walls and the operators were soon reporting reception from the remarkably distant points of New York and Colon.

In the meantime, the War Department removed all of its munitions and most of the cannon. Vandals had already taken scores of brass bolts and rings from the stone cistern-covers, many of the silvered, mirror-like door knobs from the officers' quarters, and even entire doors and windows. The quarters were littered with tons of fallen plaster, soggy with the rain that came through rusty roofs. Salvagers pulled out embrasure irons, gun tracks and practically everything else of the sort except the 25-ton cannons on the top deck that were too heavy for either Army or junk men to bother with. A few of the thousands of cannonballs were left half buried in the parade.

It was in 1904 that the Naval Coal Depot was finally completed. Not sixty minutes after the contractors turned the equipment over to the Navy, a "cyclone" came along and twisted one of the two coal transporters almost beyond recognition. It was repaired. Next, the dredging contractor gave up, 40,000 cubic yards short of his contract. And now that war was once more past, again there was a difference of opinion upon the value of Dry Tortugas. This time the antagonists enjoyed a permanent victory, for in 1907 the Tortugas coal depot was "discontinued".⁶⁶

The islands passed to the Department of Agriculture the following year for protection of the same wildlife that Audubon recorded there in 1832. As for the fort, the vandals could prowl unmolested. Fire gutted the barracks in 1912, and the story was

66. *Id.*, Bur. of Yards and Docks (1899-1905); Bur. of Equip- (1899-1908); U. S. Marine Corps (1902, 1904, 1905); General Order no. 59, Apr. 30, 1900 (AGO).

later repeated for the once grandiose officers' quarters. True, the days of 1917 brought the "key to the Gulf" once more to the mind of the military for a little while. The wireless station was rehabilitated and a few seaplanes landed in the harbor, but this flurry of war activity was soon past.

Over the course of half a century, the Army had spent over \$2,700,000 on Fort Jefferson. Navy work brought the total well past \$3,500,000.⁶⁷ And if the ordeal was long and painful and costly in terms of work and human lives, yet this homely pile of brick will remain a fitting memorial to the vigor of a young nation. For by Proclamation of January 4, 1935, wherein Franklin D. Roosevelt named the area a national monument, the Gibraltar of the Gulf of Mexico is saved from oblivion. But the story is not yet finished.

67. Compilations by H. L. Garrett, National Park Service, from U. S. Engineer Office accounts 1844-1877 and *Reports of the Secretary of the Navy* (1899-1909).