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Thomas Reid, **America's Fortress: A History of Fort Jefferson , Dry Tortugas , Florida.** Gainesville, FL : University Press of Florida, 2006. 163 pp. Photographs, appendices, architectural drawings, bibliography, index.

Review by G. Alan Knight

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Fort Jefferson remains one of the more forgotten structures of America 's coastal defense system of the 1800s, a place in the 21<sup>st</sup> century still handicapped by its off-shore location on Garden Key in the Florida reefs, seventy-five miles northwest of Key West . The barren key on which the fort was built was one of many comprising the so-called Dry Tortugas , a most apt description in light of the climate and very limited vegetation that characterized these small islands. Access to the fort, currently a site administered by the National Park Service, is primarily by tour boat or small aircraft, both rather expensive sightseeing modes. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century infrequent schooners or boats from Key West provided the only link to and from the mainland.

Thomas Reid of Lamar University in Beaumont , Texas , is the author of this fascinating and exhaustively researched account of the fort's development, use, and operational difficulties. While designed as a defensive fortification which would become (and remains) the largest masonry structure in the Western Hemisphere, Reid shows that it never achieved its destiny for that purpose but acquired a reputation as a site for the incarceration of military prisoners and some civilians of notoriety such as Dr. Samuel A. Mudd and three co-conspirators convicted of complicity in the Lincoln assassination.

Despite earlier construction of a lighthouse and keeper's cottage in 1825, actual construction of the fort did not begin until 1846 and lasted for thirty years, ultimately remaining unfinished. Fort Jefferson became a pet project of the long-serving Chief of Army Engineers whose tenure began in 1838, Brig. Gen. Joseph G. Totten. Fort Jefferson's ability to attract funding year after year is eloquent testimony to the power wielded by the general on Capitol Hill. Funding would continue despite advances in technology, such as rifled naval guns, that made masonry forts obsolete. While the appropriations varied considerably and were geared to the state of the nation's economy, Reid quotes research suggesting that at no time did the politicians ever question national defense policy and the role of the U.S. Army's engineers in implementing one facet of it.

The author shows that the fort's construction was intimately linked to changing perceptions of America's overseas role in a period of assertive nationalism better known as "manifest destiny" which flowered following the War with Mexico. The fort was actually built during a period of national defense strategy known as the Third System (1816-67), in essence a more sophisticated system of fortifications deemed essential following Britain's burning of the Capitol and the successful American defense of Baltimore. The early Civil War years lent impetus to construction efforts but only for a relatively short time. By the late 1880s, the fort had outlived its untested military usefulness though it served briefly as a naval coaling station in 1898. The U.S.S. Maine loaded coal there before steaming on to its tragic end in the harbor at Havana, Cuba.

The location of the fort was chosen in order to protect Key West and utilized the Dry Tortugas as a secure anchorage for naval vessels in time of war. While strategically the choice was good, the actual location was replete with numerous disadvantages starting with the fact that the key was only slightly over three feet above the water line, subject to hurricanes, and in extent about seven acres, five of which will be enclosed by the fort. The fort itself would be hexagonal in shape, double-casemated, and built of brick. Interestingly, initial plans for the fort were developed by then Lieutenant Montgomery Meigs (later Quartermaster General) based upon a design of General Totten. Each of two tiers of casemates was designed to accommodate 150 cannons.

Given the location, readers will not be surprised to learn of the difficulties associated with obtaining the labor needed to construct the fort. Starting in 1847 the sources were slaves and white contract labor. Supervising the work initially was Corps of Engineers Lieutenant Horatio G. Wright. Reid suggests that productivity of the labor force was less than optimal. Slaves tended to work at their own pace while the white contract labor, mostly from the north, had great difficulty acclimating to their surroundings, particularly as the tropical heat grew more intense. However, the author points out that notwithstanding their productivity, the slaves were able to be employed year round as they were mostly from Key West and largely immune to the tropical diseases of the area. By 1860 with the threat of war looming, despite real progress that had been made in construction, Montgomery Meigs is quoted as noting that along with a number of other Florida forts, Fort Jefferson was still totally without guns. (p. 33) This defect was soon remedied, albeit only partially.

Only in 1861 would American troops be assigned to the fort, following which efforts to upgrade its defensive capabilities progressed rapidly. The desired but ultimately unrealized outcome was equipping Fort Jefferson with 450 guns and a garrison of 1,000 troops. Reid details the units and commanders that garrisoned the fort through the Civil War years and after. Disappointingly, he does very little to illuminate these characters, making no use of resources such as the *Historical Register and Dictionary of the United States Army* by Francis B. Heitman which would have provided biographical details on many, though not all of the officers who served at the fort. By 1863 the fort would also house a number of military convicts among its personnel and in 1864, concurrent with a new assessment that its strategic value was very limited, the prisoner population began to increase substantially. The author addresses the problems associated with this population.

Reid's portrayals of the sanitation deficits at the fort and the appalling level of sickness are highly instructive. His account of the morbidity of troops and prisoners would, however, have been measurably strengthened by extracting data from War Dept. Circular No. 4: *Report on Barracks and Hospitals with Descriptions of Military Posts* by Asst. Surgeon John S. Billings, published in 1871. Reid deals with the realities of sewer back-ups, contaminated water in cisterns, the shortage of fresh fruit and vegetables, and the highly variable quality of medical care available. Typhoid, yellow fever and cholera

claimed numerous victims and alcohol abuse was prevalent. The author points out that an adjoining island or reef, Bird Key, was used for interring the fort's deceased....a singularly poor site as the ocean undercut some of the burial sites.

For those interested in 19<sup>th</sup> century U.S. coastal fortifications, the impact of politics on construction and use, the difficulties of motivating and controlling the workforce, and a picture of an ever-changing cast of both obscure and high-profile units, commanders, civilians, and prisoners, this is essential reading at a reasonable cost.



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