

As Historic Forts Crumble, Area’s “Third System” May Not See Third Century

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Author’s note: This is part of a series exploring the coastal outposts that once surrounded greater New Orleans, principally along the brackish waters of Lake Pontchartrain. In previous months we looked at [West End](#), [Spanish Fort](#), and [Milneburg](#), as well as [eastern New Orleans](#) and [Bucktown](#). Today we examine the old military forts of our coastal perimeter.



Fort Proctor (Beauregard) on the shores of Lake Borgne; drone photograph by Marco Rasi (@marcorasi1960), 2020.

They stand stoically along our littoral, obsolete sentinels of a bygone era. They lean and crack in the face of weather and waves, some enveloped in vegetation, others tumbled in ruin.

They are our region’s historic forts and batteries—brick-and-mortar masterpieces of military engineering, with names like Pike, Macomb, Bienvenue, Dupré, Proctor, St. Philip, Jackson, and Livingston, among others. This decade marks 200 years since the concerted effort to build them, a project that became known as the “Third System” of national defenses.

The name came from the strategic rethinking of defensive infrastructure following the American Revolution.

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Fresh from years of improvised war tactics, officers of the new nation's armed forces came to appreciate the importance of military science and planning, and realized that engineers and architects would have to collaborate with soldiers and artillerymen in future conflicts. They consulted with French advisors with an eye toward building a network of forts, armories and depots at strategic key sites along coasts and rivers— an integral system, not just a smattering of assets.

Launched in 1794, this “First System” saw limited funding and localized oversight, leading to “irregular and...inadequate” results, according to historian Ian C. Hope. One European advisor in 1799 derided the primitive earthworks and timber stockades of the First System as “either good for nothing or at least defective, so that money spent...may be said to be thrown away.”

The effort did, however, help launch West Point in 1802 as the nation's premier military academy and engineering school. To this day, the federal government's chief engineering body is a military department, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

In 1806, President Thomas Jefferson, concerned about foreign threats and keen on expansion into the lands of the Louisiana Purchase, funded the construction of an improved network of permanent masonry coastal and interior forts. This “Second System,” guided by newly minted American engineers rather than European advisors, yielded over 60 fortifications of various types and sizes, built mostly during 1808 to 1812.

In our region, the Americans upgraded the old Spanish colonial *Fortaleza San Felipe* (formerly the French colonial *Fort Plaquemine*) as *Fort St. Philip*, on the east bank of lower *Plaquemines Parish* near the mouth of the *Mississippi*. They also rebuilt *Fort Leon* at *English Turn*, and *Fuerte San Juan* at the mouth of *Bayou St. John*, becoming *Fort St. John* (today's *Spanish Fort*).

Then came the *War of 1812*, the British attacks on *Washington, D.C.* and *Baltimore*, and the culminating *Battle of New Orleans* in 1815, all of which evidenced the need for even-better coastal defenses.

In 1817, President *James Monroe* conceived what would later be known as the “Third System,” described by Hope as “a broader defense strategy [of] fortified frontiers connected to a system of mobilization...that would allow state-sponsored militias to respond adequately to any maritime threat.”

Launched in 1820, the Third System featured the latest thinking in fort design and construction materials. It also placed new emphasis on what Secretary of War *John Calhoun* described as the nation's “southern...frontier of the *Gulf of Mexico*,” namely the labyrinthine bayous and marshes surrounding the critical port city of *New Orleans*.

It's during this era, from 1820s to the 1850s, when our regional bastions were built or rebuilt to the highest standards of the day. Their locations offer clues about navigable waterways the early 1800s, pinpointing strategic spots along ingresses of various widths and depths.

Some were prominent positions that had been fortified since colonial times. Near the mouth of the *Mississippi*, for example, engineers began work at *Fort Jackson* starting in 1822, and gave the older *Fort St. Philip* across the river an upgrade in the 1840s.

At *Rigolets Pass*, where entry to *Lake Pontchartrain* could be gained from *Lake Borgne* and the *Mississippi Sound*, engineers replaced the primitive *Fort Petit Coquilles*, dating to 1813, with a massive new crescent-shaped bastion completed in 1824 and renamed *Fort Pike* in 1827.

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Fort Pike (above) and Macomb (below), on Rigolets and Chef Menteur Pass; photographs by Marco Rasi (@marcorasi1960), 2020.



The other lake gateway, Chef Menteur Pass, got a similarly designed citadel between 1821 and 1828. Originally called Fort Chef Menteur, it was renamed Fort Wood in 1835 and Fort Macomb in 1851.

With its militarization of the coastal periphery, the Third System obviated the need for that older generation of inner redoubts closer to New Orleans. Authorities abandoned Fort St. Leon at English Turn as well as Fort St. John at Bayou St. John, which later came into private hands and gradually transformed into the recreational destination known as Spanish Fort. They also relinquished Fort St. Charles, the last of the five colonial-era bastions that once surrounded the French Quarter. Cleared in 1821, the site became occupied by today's Old U.S. Mint, built in 1835, as well as the traffic lanes of Esplanade Avenue at the North Peters Street intersection.

Also in 1835, the U.S. military constructed New Orleans Barracks in the lowermost-corner of Orleans Parish, in today's Lower 9th Ward, and erected four armed corner towers to defend it. Later renamed Jackson Barracks, the installation today retains two towers and most of its original barracks, now home to the Louisiana National Guard.

The Third System went further than previous efforts in fortifying vulnerable spots, no matter how remote or secluded. Its engineers built Battery Bienvenue in 1835 where Bayou Bienvenue outflows into Lake

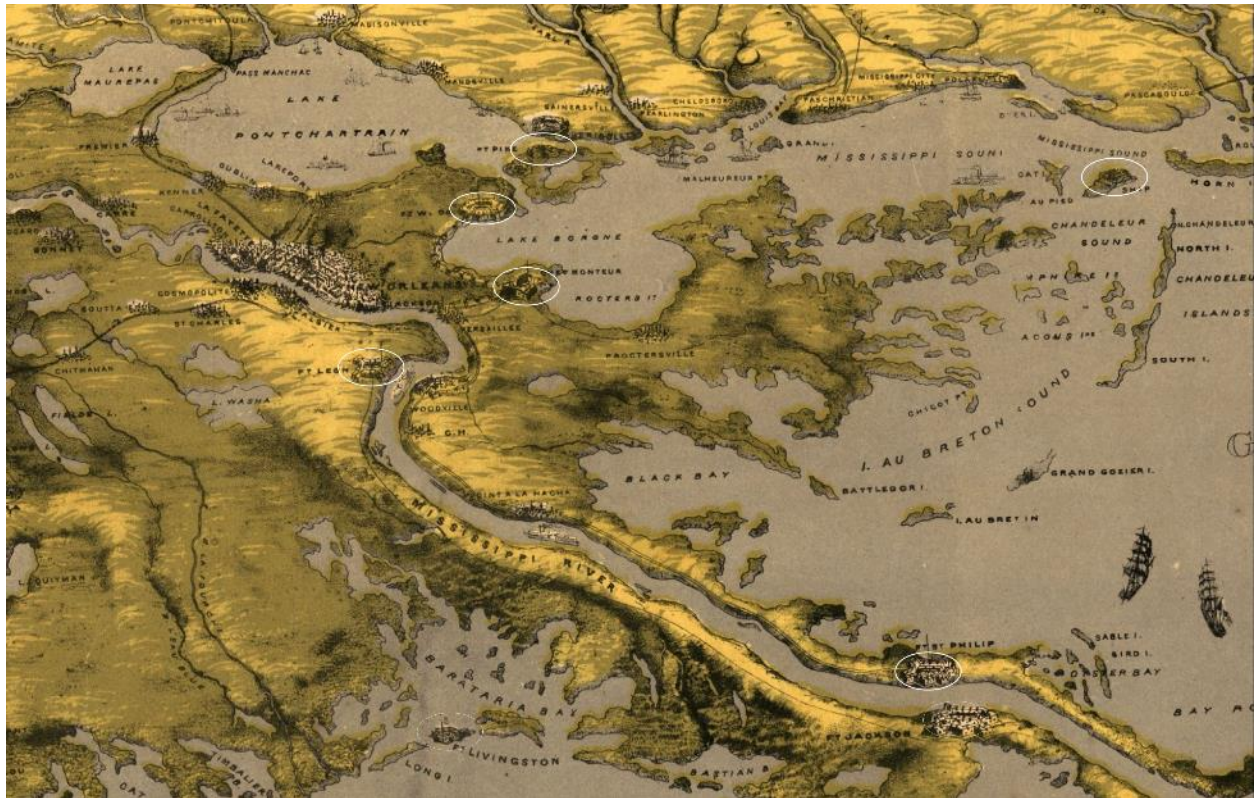
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Borgne, which the British had used to invade 20 years earlier. They added Tower Dupré, sometimes referred to as Martello Tower, in 1840 and Proctor's Tower, or Fort Beauregard, in 1856 to guard the lake's southern shore, which could be used to gain access to Bayou Yscloskey and Bayou Terre aux Boeuf and attack the city from St. Bernard Parish.

To the south, the Barataria Basin offered a particularly stealthy entree into the flanks of the metropolis, as evidenced by the rampant smuggling activity of this region. To guard the basin's gateway at Barataria Pass, engineers erected Fort Livingston in 1840 on Grande Terre Island—not coincidentally the former basecamp of the pirates Jean and Pierre Lafitte and their "hellish banditti," as Maj. Gen. Andrew Jackson called them, and very nearly a British invasion foothold had not the Americans raided it in 1814.

A similarly strategic isle to the east, Ship Island, so named for its valuable deep harbor near the otherwise shallow Mississippi Gulf Coast, became the site of one of the last Third System projects, Fort Massachusetts, started in 1859.

By 1860, according to the late military historian Frederic Codman Parkerson, New Orleans ranked as "America's most fortified city."



"Bird's eye view of Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and part of Florida," from Library of Congress, with selected Third System forts encircled (annotation by Richard Campanella).

But all that planning for an external threat failed to foresee that a terrible conflict would instead brew from within. In 1861, Southern states began seceding from the Union and joining the Confederacy. Rebels in South Carolina bombarded the Third System bastion of Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor, and the Civil War ensued.

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Union forces moved to suppress the rebellion, starting with a blockade of Southern ports. This strategy put New Orleans in the crosshairs, and its Third System forts in precisely the role for which they were designed—except with their own builders as combatants.

Confederates seized each fort and, not knowing from where the Union might attack New Orleans, erected additional interior defenses. The biggest was Camp Parapet in Jefferson Parish, at present-day Causeway Boulevard at River Road, followed by positions on Bayou St. John, the Pontchartrain Railroad on what is now Elysian Fields Avenue, in lower Algiers and along the Company Canal in present-day Westwego.

On account of scant resources and sheer urgency, however, these Confederate fortifications ended up looking more like those earlier First System efforts—primitive, lightly armed earthworks.

As for Third System forts, some would see the threat of war, or minor action. The only two in our region that would see large-scale combat were Fort Jackson and Fort St. Philip, which engaged in an extended naval battle with Admiral Farragut's Union fleet in April 1862.

After a climactic nocturnal exchange, the Union warships slipped past the twin bastions and made their way to New Orleans. Federal troops would occupy the city and river parishes for the remainder of the war.

The occupation returned the region's Third System forts to Union control, and Northern soldiers completed those still unfinished, such as Fort Massachusetts and Proctor's Tower. The interruption left its mark: to this day, Fort Massachusetts has two distinct colors in its brickwork, the brown portions made from local clay available before and after the war, and the red portions using bricks imported from Maine during the war.

What eventually ended the Third System era was not an enemy attack or a division within, but technology and changing geopolitics. Advances in artillery, in the form of rifled barrels and high-caliber smooth-bore cannon, brought deadly accuracy and concentrated force to shots fired at walls of brick and mortar, potentially smashing them. State-of-the-art architecture of the 1820s had given way to state-of-the-science artillery of the 1860s.

Moreover, political leaders sensed the threat of coastal invasions had diminished, as the old colonial powers gradually lost or withdrew from their hemispheric interests. The likelihood of overseas engagements, meanwhile, increased, and that called for naval investments, not domestic forts.

The Third System officially ended in 1867, fifty years after its inception, and for the next thirty years, military planners didn't quite know what to do with them. Most were erratically funded, partially manned, and lightly armed; some served as garrisons or outposts for civilian government projects, and still others were turned over to state, parish or private ownership.

But in the late 1890s, the old threat came back to life. U.S. relations deteriorated with Spain over imperial interests. American military planners once again focused on coastal vulnerability, upgrading selected Third System forts with steel shields and modern artillery.

Forts Jackson and St. Philip got new batteries and hydraulically mounted guns, as well as mines in the waters of the adjacent Mississippi River. They became "better armed than [they] had been in many years," according to historian Jerome A. Greene, author of a 1982 government study.

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Other local forts, however, were deemed unlikely targets, and were never remilitarized.

When the two nations went to war in 1898, the action played out entirely offshore, and ended in a decisive American victory. The upgraded defenses once again went unused, after which the U.S. further divested itself of the old forts.

World Wars I and II brought renewed military attention to the Gulf Coast, but with a few minor exceptions, most of it went not to forts but to naval and aerial hunting of German submarines.

By the end of the Second World War, the Third System forts became permanently obsolete. In subtropical Louisiana, deterioration set in. Hurricanes battered them. Subsidence sunk them. Erosion exposed them. Summer downpours and winter freezes cracked their walls, and vegetation wedged them apart. Vandals and treasure hunters took their toll, carting away souvenir bricks and anything iron.

Only those forts that gained protection as historic sites got some level of maintenance, such as Fort Jackson (a Plaquemines Parish park), Fort Pike (a Louisiana State Historic Site), and Fort Massachusetts (part of the U.S. National Park Service's Gulf Islands National Seashore).

But limited funding amid ever-worsening environmental conditions has put in question a third century for the region's Third System forts. Visitors are no longer able to enter Fort Jackson, for safety reasons, and Fort Pike, a unique visitor experience in a city replete with historic buildings, has been closed for budgetary reasons since 2015, though State Parks officials hope to reopen it soon on a limited basis.

Other old bastions, such as Fort Macomb and Fort St. Philip, look like Mayan ruins. Fort Proctor resembles an island-castle from another world, while rising seas encroach further upon Fort Livingston. Remote Battery Bienvenue looks more like a marsh thicket than an engineered structure, and Tower Dupré is literally an island—of scattered bricks and fallen walls.

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Fort Pike (photo by Richard Campanella)