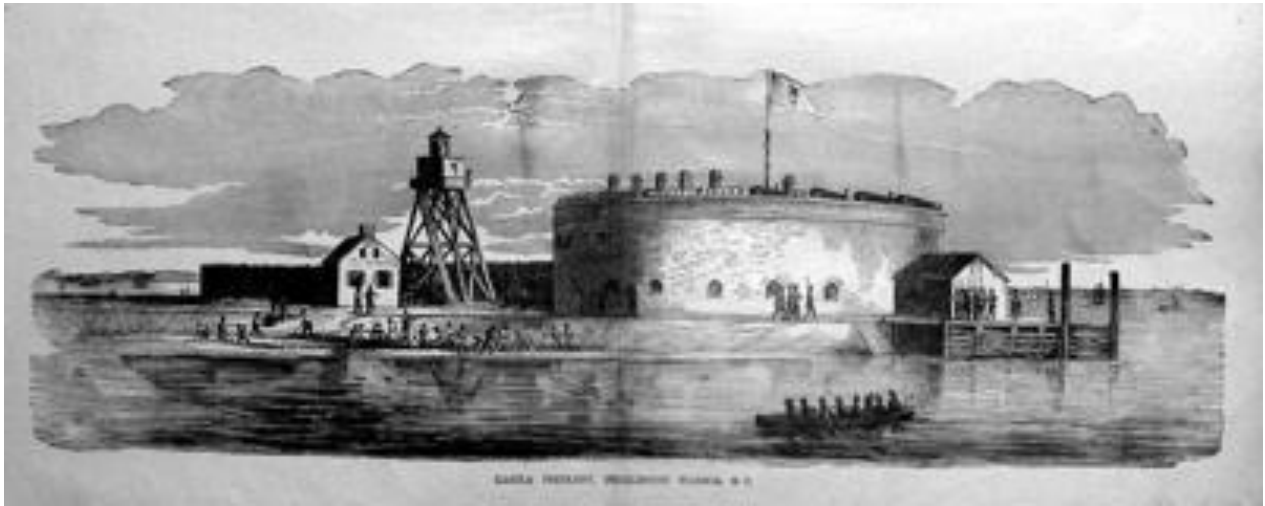


# Castle Pinckney: Silent Sentinel in Charleston Harbor

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It is the “other” island in Charleston harbor, the one closest to peninsula Charleston and easily seen from the Battery, often mistaken by visitors for Fort Sumter. Although not much remains of Castle Pinckney proper and its thick brick walls are now crumbling amidst a tangle of wild vegetation, the site has a long and impressive history.

The actual name of this centrally located harbor island is “Shute’s Folly.” Like Folly Beach, the island was originally much larger and named for the lush vegetation it once held – “folly” being an archaic term for a verdant thicket of trees and plants. The island’s first historical mention is found in 1711 when its then-224 acres were deeded to Colonel Alexander Parris (for whom Parris Island near Beaufort was named), a commander of the South Carolina provincial militia. In

1746, the island was deeded to a Quaker named Joseph Shute, thus the name "Shute's Folly," and remained in the Shute family until 1763.

The island's history during these early years is sketchy. It may have been used by coastal Indians in some fashion, for old maps show circular formations of oyster shells which may have been shell middens. As early as 1717, there is mention that it was used as a place to hang convicted pirates and legend has it that their bodies were left hanging from the gallows as a deterrent to others who might consider entering into acts of piracy.

There is early mention of a grove of orange trees during the period of Shute's ownership and, indeed, during his time oranges were grown in Charleston and the surrounding areas in some abundance. In 1805, 50 acres on the island were purchased by Jonathan Lucas, who, in 1795, had invented the first water-driven rice mill. Since maps of this period show a building on Lucas' property, it may be that there was a rice mill on the site at one time.

Historically, the island's strategic harbor location gave it a military significance. Yet throughout the centuries, the fort never quite attained full military importance. Even as early as 1736, when the first thought toward erecting a fortification on the island was considered, the intended fort was built instead at the point of Charleston's peninsula.

It wasn't until the American Revolution that the first fort was erected on the island, a small earth and timber structure. In 1797, a second and somewhat larger fort was begun of logs and sand on the island and named Fort Pinckney in honor of General Charles Cotesworth Pinckney of Revolutionary War fame. Facing southeast, this early fort was shaped in a half hexagon, mounted eight guns and held quarters for a small contingency of officers and men. This fort was severely damaged by the hurricane of 1804, so much so that in 1808 the fort was entirely rebuilt, this time of brick and constructed in a horseshoe shape.

It mounted two tiers with a capability of holding 21, possible 30 guns and had quarters for 50 men in peacetime and 105 men when fully garrisoned. Despite the outbreak of the War of 1812 and Charleston's direct involvement in that conflict, the fort saw no action. By 1826, it was considered a secondary work by the defense department.

The island began to erode severely in the 1820s causing further problems. In 1831, extensive repairs were necessary and stone embankments were put into place around the fort to offset the encroaching sea. It was maintained by a small garrison and housed a post hospital but with the outbreak of the Second Seminole War in 1835, the garrison was moved to Florida and the fort was empty again. It wasn't until the 1850s that Congress appropriated money to repair the fort and, in 1855, a navigational light was installed. Although the fort remained partially armed, it was ungarrisoned and used primarily as a city powder storehouse. So it remained until 1860.

In December of that year, with secession fever at its height, preparations were made to regarrison Castle Pinckney with U.S. troops. A lieutenant, ordnance sergeant, four mechanics and 30 laborers were sent to clean up the fort. Following Major Robert Anderson's Christmas night move of his garrison from Fort Moultrie to Fort Sumter (a step seen by South Carolina as a direct act of war), on the afternoon of December 27, 1860, Castle Pinckney was taken, without incident, by a detachment from the 1st Regiment of Rifles under Colonel Johnson J. Pettigrew. For the following four years, Castle Pinckney remained in Confederate hands. Following the First Battle of Manassas (Bull Run) on July 21, 1861, Castle Pinckney was converted into a stockade for Union prisoners-of-war, garrisoned by the Charleston Zouave Cadets. One-hundred-and-thirty Union soldiers captured during that battle were held at the fort, consisting of soldiers and officers from the 11th Zouaves, the 69th Irish Regiment, the 79th Highlanders and the 8th Michigan Regiment. After their exchange in October the fort was converted back to a

defensive work, although its location in the inner harbor made it less strategically important than other harbor fortifications.

By 1864, the fort's casemates were disarmed, the interior was filled with sand and although four guns remained on the island, it saw no further action. Following the federal occupation of Charleston in February 1865, Castle Pinckney was again used for a brief time as a prison, primarily for captured blockade runners and civilian prisoners.

This was probably the darkest part of Castle Pinckney's history, for it was during this period that 25 black Union soldiers who had participated in a mutiny were executed and buried on the island.

With peace, Castle Pinckney again fell into disuse. In 1878, with the island now under the control of the treasury department, a light station and supply depot were built on the island, at which time a light keeper's house and other buildings were erected. It remained active as a light station until 1917 when it was transferred to the U.S. Corps of Engineers who used the island buildings as a storage facility.

In 1924, Castle Pinckney was designated by President Calvin Coolidge as a national monument and it looked as if it might be preserved as an historical site. By 1933, however, when it came into the hands of the National Park Service, it was not considered "significant" enough to merit this status and was declassified. In 1958, it was sold to the South Carolina Ports Authority and, once again, plans were discussed towards erecting a museum on the site. Again, nothing ever materialized. The island remained unoccupied and its buildings empty. In December 1967, a tremendous fire broke out on the island, a blaze which destroyed the house and other wooden buildings on the island. Today, Castle Pinckney is on the National Register of Historic Places and is owned by the Sons of Confederate Veterans, Fort Sumter Camp 1269. There is hope that someday the site will be fully explored historically and archaeologically and what remains of the original fort preserved.

Castle Pinckney holds an unquestionably important place in Charleston's past, an abandoned, silent sentinel in Charleston's harbor of history.

*(Suzannah Smith Miles is a writer and Lowcountry and Civil War historian.)*