

DESCRIBE THE PRESENT AND ORIGINAL (IF KNOWN) PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

Camp Parapet is a brick powder magazine originally situated in a redoubt (a temporary outlying fortification used for defense). It was part of the extensive fortifications built along Metairie Ridge to protect New Orleans and Jefferson Parish from Union assaults from the northwest. The site is at the dead end of Arlington Street just east of Causeway Boulevard between the River Road and Jefferson Highway.

On June 29, 1861, the New Orleans Common Council formed a military and civil engineer commission to design the city's fortifications with Major Benjamin Buisson as its president. Buisson immediately drew up plans for surrounding the city and work was begun on the West Bank of Jefferson Parish on July 16th. Due to internal strife among the landowners, whose property was seized, and protests from the Jefferson Parish Police Jury, work on the defenses was halted on July 31st and not resumed until mid-August.

A Times-Picayune newspaper account of September 15, 1861, states the fortification of the lower section of the city (Camp Parapet) was commenced as of August 22nd. Major Martin Luther Smith, the Confederate state engineer, was in charge of construction and Gabriel and Carrejolles were the contractors. J. W Burek, William Henry and Lt. B. M. Elarrod of the Louisiana State Artillery were detailed as assistant engineers.

As built, the defenses consisted of a zigzag earthen embankment roughly paralleling the present route of Causeway Boulevard from the river toward the lake extending to a point north of Metairie Road. At either end was a redoubt. On the lakeside at the edge of a swamp was Fort Star, a star-shaped earthen parapet with a magazine.

Near the river was Camp Parapet, all irregularly shaped earthen redoubt enclosing a powder magazine, an observatory, a hot-shot furnace, officer quarters and a guard house. The earth works were nine-feet high and fronted by a ditch 30 feet wide and 6 feet deep.

Today, the brick powder magazine is the only remaining structure. It consists of a twenty foot long, four foot high tunnel that leads into an eight by fifteen foot interior room where the explosives were stored. A wrought iron gate still exists at the tunnel opening and at the entrance to the interior room. Originally the entire structure was covered with a mound of earth for added protection. Only the front gate and a small vent at the top of the earthen mound were exposed. Now the entire powder magazine is exposed and no trace of the earthen mounds remains. This makes the brick vent appear to be a chimney. Actually, the air vent was fitted with iron grills at the opening so as to prevent any fire or artillery from dropping into the storage area.

The brick magazine is still structurally sound and is in remarkably good condition. Jefferson Parish owns approximately 9,100 square feet of land surrounding the structure. From Arlington Street a cul-de-sac encircles the magazine and beyond this area there are houses and other residential-related buildings.

Plans are being proposed by the Jefferson Parish Bicentennial Commission to preserve the magazine and create a small park with landscaped walkways and seating accommodations. An arch will be erected at the entrance to the park on Arlington Street, and a fence will surround the area. Restoration work on the magazine, though not extensive, will include repointing the brickwork and replacing cracked bricks.

SPECIFIC DATES BUILDER/ARCHITECT

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Camp Parapet Powder Magazine is of local importance because it is the only surviving Civil War military structure in Jefferson Parish. Although no significant military action took place in the parish, Camp Parapet and other fortifications were part of an elaborate ring of military structures

around the city of New Orleans and smaller surrounding communities. The plan for these fortifications was devised by the Common Council of the City of New Orleans.

On June 29, 1861, the Common Council formed a military and civil engineer commission for the purpose of designing the inner defenses of the city. Major Benjamin Buisson was named as its head by Louisiana Governor Thomas Moore.

Major Buisson was born in France in 1793 at the height of the French Revolution and was graduated in the spring of 1813 from the Ecole Polytechnique. He became an artillery officer in Emperor Napoleon's army and was awarded the Legion of Honor in 1814. After the fall of Paris, Buisson came to New Orleans in 1817 where his cousins were living.

In New Orleans he became an architect, engineer, contractor and surveyor. Amongst his works was an early Custom House for New Orleans built in 1819. As a surveyor and engineer for the growing Parish of Jefferson, he laid out villages and faubourgs in what is now uptown New Orleans, including the City of Lafayette in 1832. He was a member of an early Jefferson Parish Police Jury, and today a large Jefferson family, the Arnoults, are direct descendants of Buisson. He died in 1874 with the rank of Brigadier General and is buried in New Orleans in St. Louis Cemetery No. 2.

Alterations to Buisson's fortification plan of the city were made by Major Martin Luther Smith employed as a district engineer for the Confederate army. He moved Buisson's original plan for Camp Parapet one half mile upstream from the Carrollton location "where its view is unobstructed and range given for the largest gun". Because of protestations of local landowners over their property being seized for military purposes, the Confederate government assumed the authority to build the defense line under the direction of Major Smith.

Martin Luther Smith was a native of New York and an 1838 West Point graduate with the rank of second lieutenant, topographical engineer. His assignments included service in the Mexican War and he was made captain in 1860 while still in U. S. Service. Upon entering the Confederacy he was made a major. Toward the end of the war, he was instrumental in the defense of Vicksburg.

The powder magazine and its associate structures and embankments were originally named Fort John Morgan by Major General M. Lovell, C. S. A. John Morgan was an American Confederate soldier born in Huntsville, Alabama in 1823. He served in the Mexican War and was commissioned a Colonel following the Battle of Shiloh.

Camp Parapet and nearby Fort Star served as the northwestern defense line of New Orleans. At the time of the Civil War the present day neighborhood of Carrollton in the City of New Orleans (Orleans Parish) was an incorporated city located within Jefferson Parish and was the parish seat of government. The area to the west was known as "above Carrollton" and consisted of high land along Metairie Ridge toward the Mississippi River and a large cypress-gum-tupelo swamp and marshes extending toward Lake Pontchartrain. It was in this area that Camp Parapet was located.

The camp was located near the river surrounded by a zigzagging earthen redoubt enclosing powder magazines, an observatory, a hot-shot furnace, officers quarters, and a guard house. Today only the one powder magazine, used for the storage of explosives remains. In military terminology, the parapet is a wall or bank used to protect troops from frontal enemy fire, and from this the camp took its name.

From Camp Parapet an earthwork fortification extended across Metairie Ridge toward the edge of the swamp to Fort Star. Fort Star or Star Redoubt, so named because it was shaped like a ten-pointed star, consisted of a powder magazine surrounded by a parapet. Today, the approximate location of the fort would be near Causeway Boulevard and 45th Street.

Nearby Confederate encampments included Camp Williams near Metairie Ridge to the east; Camp Walker at the old Metairie Race Track, now Metairie Cemetery, and Camp Lewis, below Carrollton to the east. No structures at any of these camps survive today.

Confederate troops were stationed at Camp Parapet in 1861. During the first few months of the war the camp took on a party atmosphere. Barbecues and balls were held frequently. One of the main duties of the camp was to guard the nearby New Orleans, Jackson and Great Northern Railroad. In April, 1862, New Orleans was attacked from downriver under the command of Union Admiral Farragut. Soon federal troops took control of Camp Parapet.

A description of the Union take over is found in a May 21, 1862, Harper's Weekly. "The work" it: stated, referring to the powder magazine, "was well constructed."

After the Union forces took over, they strengthened Camp Parapet and erected a new fort, Fort Banks, across the Mississippi River located under the present day Huey P. Long Bridge. Fort Banks was probably built to provide crossfire with Camp Parapet, in case of a Confederate attack by river.

Behind Camp Parapet to the east was located the blacksmith shop, a grocery store and contraband (former Negro slaves) quarters. North of Camp Parapet behind the line of fortification was the camp ground and the camp of the heavy artillery near Bayou Metairie. Just outside the fortification line was the camp cemetery. A small cemetery still exists on the site today along Scott Street t near Causeway Boulevard. No markers relating to the Civil War period can be found, however.

Diseases were prevalent because of unsanitary conditions and the low lying land. Adding to this problem were the refugee slaves who flocked to the camp for food and shelter after the Union command issued a declaration that freed slaves and homeless Negroes had to be fed and housed.

Union General Benjamin F. Butler was put in command of New Orleans and surrounding areas, although he did not participate in Farragut's capture of the city. Later called dictatorial and corrupt, he possessed great intelligence. He was despised by Orleanians and called "Beast" or "Spoons" Butler.

Butler found employment for some of the slaves, but excluded all unemployed persons, black or white, from the camps. Camp Parapet was under the command of Brigadier General John W. Phelps, a staunch abolitionist who actually encouraged all the Negroes to come to the Camp. Phelps wanted to change Butler's policies regarding the slaves. He suggested that the blacks be organized through apprenticeship programs that would help them to transcend the gap between slavery and freedom.

The Federal Government straddled the fence concerning the issue and Butler did the same. Phelps could not reconcile his beliefs with this policy and so resigned. By the fall of 1869 there were some 10,000 former slaves in the New Orleans area to be cared for. Many Negroes, however, were organized into regiments with the nucleus of these troops being free blacks.

After the war, a Negro farm community composed of former slaves from nearby plantations and the Negroes that remained at Camp Parapet settled in the area around the camp. Many blacks are still living in the area today in what is referred to as Shrewsbury or Harlem, one of Jefferson's largest black communities. Causeway Boulevard in this area was formerly known as Harlem Boulevard. Henry Arnout a grandson of Benjamin Buisson stated in a news article of May 3, 1936, that he grew up in the vicinity of Camp Parapet and remembers the blacks in the area wearing their blue union caps and jackets.

In the late 1800's through the 1920's the arsenal served as the Jefferson Parish East Bank Lockup. During part of its history it also housed poultry and livestock.

In 1963 the area was cleaned up and dedicated by Jefferson Parish, which owns 29,100 square feet of land surrounding Camp Parapet. The Parish Council is supporting efforts to provide a proper setting befitting this historic structure.

MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

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