

Press Release



Federalizing the Forts of Plaquemines

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Two bills that will come before the United States Congress sometime in the next few months could bring new life into Plaquemines Parish. House Bill HR 1041 and Senate Bill S626 direct the Secretary of the Interior to study the national significance of the Lower Mississippi River area and assess adding Fort Jackson and Fort St. Philip into the National Park System.



Fort Jackson in August 2009. Photo by Robert Spears.

Both the House and Senate bills are in subcommittees, but will move forward in the current legislative session. Senator Mary Landrieu and Congressman Charlie Melancon sponsor the bills which, when approved for floor action, should be passed by the end of the year. Once the bill becomes law, the National Park Service then places the Plaquemines Parish Lower Mississippi River Historic Site Study Act of 2009 on its list for implementation. The position on that list is determined by time and priority. The study is estimated to start in the fourth quarter of 2010. Once completed, the study will make recommendations on whether the National Park Service will be interested in creating a Lower Mississippi River National Park, and what that

park will consist of. In addition to the two forts there are several other Plaquemines locations that may be considered.

“Senator Landrieu, Senator Vitter, and Congressman Melancon have done a great job helping Plaquemines Parish move our two forts into the National Parks System,” said Parish President Billy Nungesser. “There’s so much history between the two forts, we look forward to the results of the study so we can get them into the federal system.”

French colonists began construction of Fort Plaquemines on the East Bank of what is now Plaquemines Parish in 1741, 35 years before the Founding Fathers established the United States of America. Fort Plaquemines would become the center of both the military and government for everything below English Turn. It would be rebuilt by the Spanish and the name was changed to Fuerte San Felipe, or Fort St. Philip. The fort’s history parallels that of Louisiana, it has operated under several different flags—French, Spanish, and American. It started out as an earthen battery, but today consists of numerous structures from the Civil War era and the Spanish American War era. Fort St. Philip was used in the Battle of New Orleans, the Civil War, and served as a training ground for American troops before they were deployed overseas during World War I. Fort St. Philip became privately owned in 1929, and remains privately owned today.

“Fort St. Philip is of great interest to historians around the world because it was commissioned prior to the Revolutionary War and because it has separate structures from both the Civil War and Spanish American War,” said James Madere, President of the Plaquemines Historic Association. “It’s overgrown with trees and bushes, it’s a victim of subsidence, and the structures need rehabilitation, but it’s salvageable.” Because it’s privately owned, Plaquemines Parish Government has no control over its condition.



Fort St. Philip overgrown and scattered with trees in December 2008. Photo by Robert Spears.

At the recommendation of Major General Andrew Jackson after the Battle of New Orleans, the United States Government began construction on Fort Jackson in 1822 to defend the lower Mississippi River. The star-shaped pentagon fort was completed in 1832 at the cost of \$554,500. A new structure was built for the Spanish American War inside the fort’s walls. Fort Jackson was used in the Civil War. Near the end of the Civil War it served as a training facility for “Buffalo Soldiers,” African American troops recruited to work in the Western States. And during World War I it was used as a training base. It was privately purchased in the 1920s and donated to the parish in 1960. Through the U.S. Department of the Interior, Fort Jackson became a national historic monument in 1961. Shortly thereafter the parish began restoration under the direction of then President of the Plaquemines Commission Council Leander H. Perez.

Fort Jackson is currently closed to the public and has been that way since Hurricane Katrina. Parish work crews keep it maintained, cutting the grass and picking up trash, but local fort experts say its overall condition is unstable at best.

“The original foundation pad was made of cypress wood and is basically now a floating foundation,” said Madere. “During a drought or heavy rain the fort will raise then settle. There are numerous cracks in the horizontal walls with bricks falling on a daily basis. Katrina’s floodwaters also damaged the electrical system.”

Local leaders haven’t sat idle waiting for the forts to go through the national process; Plaquemines Parish Government will soon accept bids for repairs which will be reimbursed by FEMA. The project is divided into phases; the first of which involves electrical and plumbing work, along with some brick masonry repairs.



Buras Volunteer Fire Dept. Oilfield Crawfish Boil-Off on Fort Jackson’s grounds in April 2009. Photo by Chuck Soileau.

While the actual fort at Fort Jackson is closed, the grounds surrounding it were packed earlier this year for the Buras Volunteer Fire Department’s Oilfield Crawfish Boil-Off. And in 2010 the Orange Festival will make its return to Fort Jackson.

Throughout their long histories, Fort St. Philip and Fort Jackson have fought off pirates, smugglers, and enemy fleets, but if accepted into the National Park System, instead of turning away outsiders, the strongholds will target them for other reasons—tourism dollars. Local leaders and

historians say the parish would experience a major boost for years to come.

“As we work to expand our tourism industry, we anticipate the forts will become a big draw to tourism all over the country and world,” said Nungesser. “Some other projects we’re considering include renovating the historical court house and the old jail, and establishing a Katrina museum.”

“By sharing our heritage with the people of the world, Plaquemines Parish will have a thriving, sustainable tourism economy,” Madere said.

“Putting the forts in the federal system will bring hundreds of thousands of people to Plaquemines Parish. Those people will buy our citrus, our seafood, and eat and drink in our restaurants,” said Nungesser.

“When visiting a fortification, the average Civil War enthusiast spends two to three days at the site,” said Rod Lincoln, Plaquemines Historic Association Historian. “They study the fort in detail, walk each wall and study all of the gun emplacements. Their families take advantage of recreational and other tourism facilities in the area. Adding the forts to the National Park System will make Lower Plaquemines a tourism destination.”