

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

History of Fort Macomb

Did you know that there's an honest-to-goodness pre-Civil War fort located within the city limits of New Orleans? Well actually, there's more than one. Standing guard over the *Rigolets* is Fort Pike, completed in 1827 after eight years of construction. Named for General Zebulon Pike, Jr. (1779-1813), as was Pikes Peak in Colorado, it guards over one of the two straits connecting Lake Pontchartrain with the Gulf of Mexico. The other access to Lake Pontchartrain, the *Chef Menteur* Pass, is guarded over by Fort Macomb - and it has a most interesting history.

Fort Macomb is named for Major General Alexander Macomb (1782 – 1841), who served as the Commanding General of the United States Army from May 29, 1828 to June 25, 1841. He is mostly forgotten today, but he did hold the top position in the U.S. Army for over thirteen years.

Before the creation of the Chief of Staff of the United States Army (Pershing, McArthur, Marshall and Eisenhower all held that post), there was generally a single senior-most officer in the army. From 1783, he was known simply as the Senior Officer of the United States Army, but in 1821, the title was changed to Commanding General of the United States Army. That position was abolished in 1903 with the institution of the Chief of Staff of the United States Army.

The nineteenth century fortress known as Fort Macomb lies on the western shore of the *Chef* Pass and guards the water route from the Gulf of Mexico to the back of the City of New Orleans. The other way in is the *Rigolets*, protected by Fort Pike. Both forts were designed by French engineer Simon Bernard and have the same plans, design, and orientation, and serve the identical purpose of protecting Lake Pontchartrain from invasion forces.

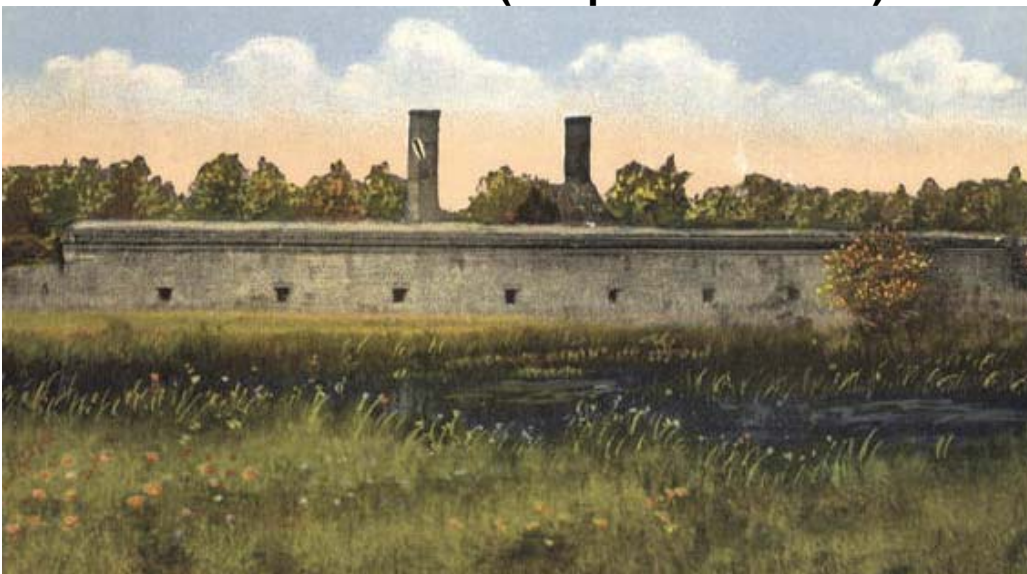
The Battle of New Orleans revealed the weaknesses in the nation's coastal defenses. President James Monroe directed that better fortifications be built along the Gulf and Atlantic Coasts. Among those

built were these two forts protecting the Crescent City. An earlier fort at the site of Fort Macomb was called Fort *Chef Menteur* until the current brick fort was constructed in 1822 (renamed Fort Wood in 1827). It wasn't named Fort Macomb until 1851.

Fort Macomb's walls are forty feet thick, and the roof is many feet deep with turf. There is a moat surrounding this fort, with a drawbridge to give entrance. Both forts were built to defend New Orleans, but neither saw battle (even through the Civil War). Union troops re-took the fort after the capture of New Orleans, but not before the Confederate soldiers destroyed the guns and burned the wooden structures.



Alexander Macomb and the fort that bears his name (old postcard view).



The Battle of New Orleans, on January 8, 1815, was the final major battle of the War of 1812 and regarded as the greatest American land victory of the war. The Americans under Major General Andrew Jackson defeated the invading British forces intent on seizing the strategic city of New Orleans, which commanded the portal to the vast territory acquired by the Louisiana Purchase. Although the Treaty of Ghent had been signed less than a month before, news of the peace did not reach the combatants until February.

Alexander Macomb was not involved in the Battle of New Orleans, but he did win acclaim during the War of 1812 as brigadier general in command of the frontier of northern New York. At the Battle of Plattsburgh on September 11, 1814 (although only having 1,500 regular troops and some militia detachments), Macomb outfoxed a British force of 10,531. In the weeks leading up to the battle, Macomb, knowing the situation, worked with his men to move trees and create fake roads in order to hide the real roads and lead the British into dead-end traps. Long narrow lines of marching British soldiers were unable to easily stop and turn around. They became ensnared in the narrow false road maze, and became sitting targets for the waiting Americans. Macomb was lauded in the American press, was promoted Major General for his conduct at this battle and received a Congressional Gold Medal - all that after first becoming commissioned as a lieutenant in the Army Corps of Engineers.

Warfare relies heavily on engineering. Without engineers there would be no supply lines to the armies, since roads, water supply, bridges and means of transport are so critical. The design and installation of forts and batteries, and the utilization of weaponry are a vital part of the engineer's domain. Desiring to eliminate America's wartime reliance on foreign engineers and artillerymen, key soldiers and legislators (including Washington, Hamilton and John Adams) urged the creation of an institution devoted to the art and science of warfare. Such a school was established in 1802 at West Point, New York, to constitute a military academy. The Army Corps of Engineers was established that very first year at West Point, and Alexander Macomb was one of the first officers to receive formal training there.

Fort Macomb and its land are now owned by the State of Louisiana. While some attempts have been made to open it to limited tourism, the decaying condition of the fort was unfortunately judged too hazardous for public visits.

Before Alexander Macomb's service as Commanding General of the United States Army, General James Wilkinson twice held the top position as Senior Officer of the United States Army, from December 15, 1796 to July 13, 1798 and from June 15, 1800 to January 27,

1812. Along with Louisiana Governor William Charles Cole Claiborne, he shared the honor of taking possession of the Louisiana Purchase on behalf of the United States in 1803.

How Wilkinson got that far is remarkable. A captain in the Revolutionary War, he fought alongside Washington and Benedict Arnold. Landing a brigadier's star at twenty, he lost it when it was revealed he plotted to oust Washington as commander-in-chief. And after Wilkinson's death it was discovered he had been a paid agent of the Spanish Crown. In 1784, the Spanish authorities closed the lower Mississippi to Americans, greatly alarming settlers in the western frontiers of Kentucky that depended on bringing their products downriver to New Orleans. In 1787 Wilkinson pledged his allegiance to Spain and formulated a scheme with Spanish governor Esteban Miró, giving Kentucky a trading monopoly on the Mississippi. In return Wilkinson promised to promote Spanish interests in the west (even attempting to orchestrate Kentucky's union with Spain). These "Kaintocks" were angry with the U.S. government for not acting aggressively enough to protect their interests. A faction within Kentucky considered becoming an independent republic (or part of Spain) rather than gaining statehood. Wilkinson's plots to set up an independent nation friendly to Spain did little except cause controversy, and came up again through Wilkinson's dealings with Aaron Burr.

Appointed Governor of the Upper Louisiana Territory in 1805 by President Jefferson, Wilkinson became the mentor of a young Army captain and explorer Zebulon Pike, Jr. That same year, Wilkinson ordered Pike to find the source of the Mississippi River and he traveled upriver into the northern territory. Soon after his return in 1806, Pike was ordered to lead an expedition through Louisiana Territory to find the headwaters of the Arkansas and Red rivers. Beginning in July of that year, Pike led what is now known as the "Pike Expedition" to explore the southwest. In early November 1806, his team sighted the famous peak named for him.

Pike and his wife had one child who survived to adulthood, Clarissa Brown Pike. She married John Cleves Symmes Harrison, a son of President William Henry Harrison. Pike later achieved the rank of brigadier general in the army, serving during the War of 1812. He was killed in 1813 during the United States' successful attack on York (now Toronto), Canada. Supported by a naval flotilla, American forces landed on the shore to the west, defeated the British and captured the town and dockyard.

There is a street in the French Quarter named for the controversial Wilkinson, and another important thoroughfare for which he was responsible. Governor Miró built an *almazon* (or *magazin*) to store Wilkinson's Kentucky products shipped down the Mississippi to New

Orleans. Magazine Street is named for this Spanish colonial era warehouse.

For those curious about the name Zebulon, it comes from the Bible. Zebulon was a son of Jacob and lived to be one hundred and fourteen years old.

McComb, Mississippi, by the way, has absolutely nothing to do with General Alexander Macomb. The town of McComb was founded in 1872 and was named after Henry Simpson McComb of the New Orleans, Jackson and Great Northern Railroad, a predecessor of the Illinois Central. Coincidentally, McComb is located in Pike County, Mississippi, once again named for explorer and general Zebulon Montgomery Pike, Jr.

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