

# Defending Tampa Bay

*The story of the guns Of Fort Dade*

With the Spanish-American War looming on the horizon, the city of Tampa, through its leading citizen, Henry Plant, convinced the government that Tampa Bay should be protected against the possibility of enemy attack. Ft Dade was established on Egmont Key in the spring of 1898, and although the war lasted only four months (and the big excitement locally was that Teddy Roosevelt and the Rough Riders gathered in Tampa on their way to Cuba) the construction of Ft. Dade and Ft. DeSoto on Mullet Key continued for years as part of a continuing program of coastal defense for this country.

After the Civil War, most U.S. defenses, including coastal defenses, were neglected. As the 1800's drew to a close, however, dramatic advances in artillery were achieved, using technology available not only to the United States, but other industrial countries as well. In the 1890's there were simultaneous innovations in the construction of long gun barrels, breech loading, and slower burning propellants. Compared to the best previous artillery, these new weapons could fire projectiles 4 times as heavy to ranges 2 to 3 times as great as any before with remarkable accuracy and armor penetrating ability. It has been suggested that guns of the type installed here on Egmont Key represented the greatest single advance in artillery between the invention of the cannon in the 14<sup>th</sup> century and the introduction of the nuclear shell only 40 years ago.

Forts changed too. Always before, forts had been conspicuous, walled structures, intended to keep the enemy out. Fortifications of the fort built here placed a few powerful guns in dispersed, concealed positions, with the expectation that the enemy could be engaged effectively at extreme range. In addition, electrically controlled underwater mines were placed in both the main ship channel and southwest channel, and lighter guns were placed to defeat enemy efforts to sweep these mines.

One of the often asked questions by visitors to Egmont Key is, "Where's the fort" Actually the entire island is Fort Dade. The large concrete structures are individual artillery batteries, each with its own name and mounting one particular sort of cannon. On the north end of Egmont Key is Battery Mellon, which mounted three 3-inch guns intended to deal with patrol boats and mine sweeping activities. Next to the south, is Battery Guy Howard, now collapsing into the Gulf, which had two 6-inch guns, and just south is Battery McIntosh, which was one of the first batteries built, mounting two 8-inch guns. The south end of the island has suffered severe erosion over the years, and there are two batteries several hundred yards out in the Gulf. These two structures were Battery John Page, mounting two 3-inch guns, and Battery Burchsted, with one 3-inch gun and two 6-inch guns.

The guns installed at Batteries McIntosh and Howard used the ingenious disappearing carriages which utilized the recoil energy of the gun to move the gun back and down behind the parapet wall, out of sight of the enemy, where it could conveniently be loaded and aimed while completely invisible from the sea. When it was ready to be fired, it was raised only for a moment, fired, and disappeared again.

On the north end of the key, adjacent to Battery Mellon, there are ruins of the buildings used for loading and maintaining the electric mines which were placed in the channels. One of the buildings still contains the ruins of a large tank in which the miles of control cables necessary for the mine system were stored to prevent them from corroding after being removed from the salt water of the Gulf.

Fort Dade remained active through World War I, used for training and to protect against the increasingly remote prospect of an enemy navy operating in the Gulf of Mexico. By the early 20's,

however, the sort of fortification built here was obsolete. The Army abandoned Ft Dade in 1923. Curiously, you would think the airplane would be what made the difference, but in fact it was further advances in artillery-by the end of World War I, battleships came to be armed with guns that could outshoot the defenses of Tampa Bay.

The idea of coastal defense seems almost foolish today, as we have lived for many years in a place where the idea of enemy ships entering Tampa Bay, firing on our cities, burning our crops, and running off our livestock seems absurd. It has not, however, always been that way through the history of Florida and the United States.