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Fort Historian at Fort De Soto Park

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FORT DE SOTO:
A PHOTOGRAPHIC ESSAY
by Alicia Addeo*

Today a visitor to Fort De Soto County Park, located on Mullet Key in Pinellas County, encounters few remnants of the post buildings which were once part of the U.S. Army installation. A brick road, concrete sidewalks, and a few fire hydrants are almost the only visible remains, except for Battery Laidley which houses four 12-inch seacoast mortars and two 6-inch rifled guns that were originally part of Fort Dade on nearby Egmont Key. Battery Bigelow is half submerged in the Gulf of Mexico. Fort De Soto’s post buildings have disappeared.

Battery Laidley dates from the establishment of the fort in 1898. Two years later construction commenced on the post buildings and other structures which proved less permanent. Whereas the battery was made of concrete and steel-reinforced I-beams, post buildings were constructed of wood with slate roofs and brick footers. Interior light was provided by mineral oil lamps. Most of the buildings had sewer and water connections which served tubs, sinks, and toilets.

Fort De Soto had one company of the Coast Artillery Corps assigned to the post, but the fort was only active until 1910. After that only a caretaker remained to watch over the buildings. In 1917 a small detachment was temporarily assigned, but four of the eight 12-inch mortars were disassembled and shipped to a newly constructed fort in San Diego, California. In June 1940 the fort buildings were disposed of by a salvage sale.

The following photographic essay, including the photographs themselves, draws largely on the records of the U.S. Army Chief of Engineers, which are located in the National Archives. These historic photographs, dating mostly from 1905-1907, give a sense of what Fort De Soto looked like at when it was in use just after the turn of the century.

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Fort De Soto Structures (circa 1905):
1. Administration Building
2. Commanding Officer’s Quarters
3. Officer’s Quarters
4. Barracks
5. Mess Hall & Kitchen
6. Post Exchange
7. Fire Station
8. Lavatory
9. Guard House
10. Civilian Employees Quarters
11. Bakery
12. Q. M. Storehouse
13. Engineer Storehouse
14. Searchlight
15. Pumphouse
16. Water tank
17. Ordnance Storehouse
18. Wagon Shed
19. Stable
20. Shed
21. Blacksmith & Carpenter Shop
22. Sawmill
23. Storehouse
24. N.C.O. Quarters
25. Hospital Steward
26. Hospital
27. Ice House
28. Mine Storehouse
29. Post Flaggpole
30. Wharf
31. Oil Storehouse
32. Target Range Shelter
33. Battery Bigelow
34. Battery Laidley

Gulf of Mexico

Tampa Bay

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Fort De Soto’s administration building, which was constructed in 1900-01 at a cost of $4,106, had 2,248 square feet of floor space.

Photograph courtesy of the National Archives.

The fort hospital was constructed in 1900-01 at a cost of $9,726. Covering 2,628 square feet, it had ten beds, four wash sinks, three wash basins, one tub, two toilets, and a urinal.

Photograph courtesy of the National Archives.
The hospital steward’s quarters covered 1,004 square feet and cost $2,653.

Photograph courtesy of the National Archives.
The single officer’s quarters were constructed in 1900-01 at a cost of $5,529, and each of the three buildings of this design had 2,938 square feet of living space.

Photograph courtesy of the National Archives.
The quarters for two noncommissioned officers were constructed in 1900-01 at a cost of $4,583 and had a floor area of 2,022 square feet.

Photograph courtesy of the National Archives.

The barracks, built in 1900-01 at a cost of $14,599, had 8,207 square feet with space for one company of 106 men. The building, shown in 1905 with soldiers lounging near the entrance, had 118 wall lockers but no toilet or washing facilities.

Photograph courtesy of the National Archives.
The lavatory, constructed in 1900-01 at a cost of $5,547, covered 1,006 square feet and had facilities designed to serve one company-sixteen wash basins, five showers, two tubs, eight toilets, and eight urinals.

Photograph courtesy of the National Archives.

The quartermaster storehouse was built at a cost of $4,063 and had 4,065 square feet of floor space.

Photograph courtesy of the National Archives.
The mess hall and kitchen, built in 1900-01 for $3,634, had 2,131 square feet of space, which was designed to serve a full company.

Photograph courtesy of the National Archives.

The pump house, built at a cost of $16,064 in 1900-01, pumped fresh water from three shallow surface wells.

Photograph courtesy of the National Archives.
The stable wagon shed was constructed in 1900-01 at a cost of $3,223. The floor area of 3,340 square feet had room for eight horses, who entered up the ramp and through the door, where a soldier stands at attention in this 1905 photograph.

Photograph courtesy of the National Archives.

This wagon shed was built in 1905 at a cost of $2,874, and its 1,904 square feet of space could hold ten vehicles.

Photograph courtesy of the National Archives.
The guard house, built in 1900-01 at a cost of $3,476, covered 957 square feet and could hold up to six prisoners.

Photograph courtesy of the National Archives.
The bake house was constructed for $1,557 and had 619 square feet of floor space.

Photograph courtesy of the National Archives.
Additional officers’ quarters were built 1905; the two-story structure, covering 4,770 square feet, cost $9,492.

Photograph courtesy of the National Archives.

The post exchange, built in 1905 at a cost of $7,555, had 3,106 square feet and was designed to serve an entire company.

Photograph courtesy of the National Archives.
The post’s fire house was constructed in 1905 at a cost of $1,180 for the 720-square-foot structure which held one engine, one hook and ladder, and one hose cart.

Photograph courtesy of the National Archives.

The ordnance store house had 2,086 square feet and was built in 1906 at a cost of $3,460.

Photograph courtesy of the National Archives.
The flagpole, built in 1902, was seventy-five feet high and constructed of iron on a concrete foundation. In this photograph the wharf can be seen in the background.

Photograph courtesy of the National Archives.
Abandoned in 1910, Fort De Soto’s wooden buildings had fallen into disrepair by the time this photograph was taken in 1938.

Photograph courtesy of Heritage Park/Pinellas County Historical Museum.

This 1938 photograph shows wooden structures still standing along a brick street.

Photograph courtesy of Heritage Park/Pinellas County Historical Museum.
One of the two buildings for noncommissioned officers as it looked in 1938.

Photograph courtesy of Heritage Park/Pinellas County Historical Museum.

One of the buildings for officers’ quarters as it appeared in 1938.

Photograph courtesy of Heritage Park/Pinellas County Historical Museum.
Another abandoned building, with an attached water tower, showing its serious state of disrepair in 1938.

Photograph courtesy of Heritage Park/Pinellas County Historical Museum.

Battery Laidley, shown here at an unknown date, still stands due to its massive walls of reinforced concrete.

Photograph courtesy of the National Archives.
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*Construction and Completion Reports of the Chief of Engineers*, Box 53 (Fort De Soto), Record Group 77, National Archives, Washington, D.C.