

The Battle of New Orleans

BY KIM A. O'CONNELL

During the Civil War, the Mississippi River was the key to the kingdom. To protect New Orleans, a primary gateway to the South, the Confederates had submerged trees and other obstructions across the mouth of the river, while Forts Jackson and St. Philip stood like sentinels on the opposing banks. In April 1862, Union Admiral David Farragut's flotilla breached the defenses and New Orleans fell.

Last year, the defenses of New Orleans were breached again, as Hurricanes Katrina and Rita delivered a one-two blow to the city and its environs. Along

with countless neighborhoods and historic sites throughout the Gulf Coast, Civil War sites in and around New Orleans were heavily damaged. Forts Jackson and St. Philip, along with Fort Pike just outside the city, were so compromised that in February the Civil War Preservation Trust (CWPT) placed them on its annual list of the most endangered Civil War sites.

Built between two levees that were

unable to withstand a 35-foot storm surge, Fort Jackson was completely flooded, filling "like a soup bowl," according to the CWPT. The forts remained submerged for weeks. When the water was finally pumped out, numerous cracks appeared in the fort's outer wall, and the site's structural integrity may have been undermined. The fort's small museum and several important artifacts were also

damaged. Plaquemines Parish, which owns the site, is now seeking grants for cleanup and restoration of the fort and artifacts. Although preservation officers from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) have assisted with artifact recovery, much is left to be done.

Fort Pike, a state historic site near Lake Pontchartrain, was also inundated, and it has been closed indefinitely. (At this time, the status of the privately owned Fort St. Philip is unclear, as the stronghold is accessible only by boat or helicopter.)

Other Civil War-related locations received some damage, but many weathered the storms fairly well. Portions of Metairie Cemetery, the resting place of Confederate Generals P.G.T. Beauregard, John Bell Hood and Richard Taylor, sat under several feet of water after the storms. Fortunately, although water lines have discolored some headstones and some roof damage to structures occurred, the tombs were undisturbed.

Located on relatively high ground in the French Quarter, famed Jackson Square was also spared. Although the square has existed since the city's founding in the 18th century, it was renamed for Andrew Jackson in 1856, with a statue of the general and president at its center. Once Union forces took the city, General Benjamin Butler ordered that the base of the statue be inscribed with the words "The Union must and shall be preserved."

But the fate of one beloved site remains uncertain. Confederate Memorial Hall, although still standing, may have won the battle of Hurricane Katrina only to risk losing the war in its aftermath. The museum, which claims the world's second-largest collection of Confederate memorabilia, was established in 1891 by veterans.

However, the museum had only recently begun to recover from financial hardships when it was forced to close immediately after the storms. With the city still facing long-term recovery challenges, tourism is virtually nonexistent and may remain that way for some time. Financial assistance is needed to prevent the museum and its priceless collections from being shuttered for good.

For more information about the New Orleans forts and Confederate Memorial Hall, visit www.civilwar.org and www.confederatemuseum.com. □



Fort Jackson spent weeks underwater, and tests are still ongoing to determine if its masonry was undermined. Debris and clutter still litter the fort in this recent photo.

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