

History of Fort Johnson

Fort Johnson, later to be associated indelibly in the minds of colonial South Carolinians with liberty, was named in honor of a determined and aggressive English aristocrat. Sir Nathaniel Johnson was governor of the colony during one of its many times of tribulation in the proprietary period. War impended between the British and the Spanish, whose powerful fortress at St. Augustine seemed to menace the very existence of the Carolinas. Accordingly, in order to make the harbor more secure against expected enemy invasions, Governor Johnson ordered the erection of a strong point on the exposed neck of land which projected into Charles Town harbor and thereby dominated it. The year was 1704, Fort Johnson's history since that time has been as continuous and traceable, if not as striking and dramatic, as that of Fort Sumter.

The fort was strengthened in 1759, when it appeared that a climax in the Anglo-French rivalry for North America was in the making. The fort saw no action, however, in this bitter controversy with the French.

During the Stamp Act crisis the now venerable fort played its role. The populace of Charles Town was incensed at the arrival in the colony of the offensive stamps. Lt. Governor William Bull, fearing violence in the streets, sent the hated stamps to Fort Johnson for safekeeping. The colony was outraged by the Stamp Act legislation --- legislation which was destined never to be enforced. The garrison at Fort Johnson was strengthened, and there the hated stamps were to remain until Parliament rescinded the Act.

Early in the Revolutionary War, Fort Johnson was seized by the rebellious colonials. Though the fort did not play a particularly important role in the military history of the revolution, this early skirmish is remembered because for the first time local provincial troops used a South Carolina flag. Before the battle Col. William Moultrie had been authorized by the revolutionary government to design a flag to accompany his troops. He chose the dark blue color of his regiment's uniforms and placed upon this background of blue the silver crescent which decorated the soldier's hats.

This was the flag that accompanied the victorious advance of the colonial troops. After the heroic resistance at the log fort across the harbor on Sullivan's Island, the palmetto was added to this handsome and unique state flag.

Throughout the rest of the 18th and 19th centuries the fort waxed or waned according to potential American involvement in foreign conflicts. Thus, the fort was strengthened before the War of 1812, but by 1830 the fort was again neglected and in a state verging on complete decay. Prior to the Civil War several permanent buildings were added.

Fort Johnson is probably best remembered today as the place from which one signaling mortar shell was fired --- a shell that opened the bombardment of Fort Sumter. The ultimate appeal had been made in the hitherto political conflict between North and South, for that one mortar shell symbolized the appeal to force.

In 1864 the fort saw its last military encounter when a group of confederates beat back and captured a sizeable force of Union troops. In the following year the fort was evacuated. Slowly it fell into rack and ruin.

Early in the 20th Century the federal government took over the fort as the Quarantine Station for the Port of Charleston. Later it was again abandoned, and the property and buildings were allowed to fall into dilapidation. Finally, in 1954, the College of Charleston, acting with the then Medical College of South Carolina, secured title to the forty acre property. A building on the point (later occupied for a few years by the South Carolina Sea Grant Consortium offices) was used as a residence for the president of the Medical College. A couple of adjoining buildings served ancillary functions for the Medical College such as cadaver storage.

The remainder of the property and buildings constituted the Fort Johnson Marine Biological Laboratory of the College of Charleston. Dr. Joseph Merkle, a marine microbiologist, was its first director. Ultimately the college's marine laboratory was renamed after Dr. George Grice, who was president of the College of Charleston when the laboratory began, and who was instrumental in establishing at the college what was apparently the first undergraduate marine biology program on the East Coast. In 1962 Dr.

Norman A. Chamberlain was named Laboratory Director.

When the College became a state institution in 1970, title to all of the College's property at Fort Johnson, except for the Grice Marine Biological Laboratory building and a small amount of surrounding land, was deeded to the newly-established South Carolina Marine Resources Division (SCMRD). The SCMRD, which moved from the Bears Bluff Laboratory (directed for many years by Dr. Robert Lunz) on Wadmalaw Island, began construction of its Fort Johnson laboratory in 1970. SCMRD moved into its administration building in

1971 under the direction of Dr. James A. Timmerman, Jr. (formerly Chair, Department of Biology, The Citadel). Dr. Edwin B. Joseph was named director in 1973, succeeded in turn by Dr. Paul A. Sandifer in 1984.

The new addition to the Grice Marine Biological Laboratory was constructed to the rear of the older building in 1975. The new facilities provided more space for teaching, research and specimen collections. Several rooms in the old Grice lab building were converted into dormitory rooms as a consequence of the demolition of the old dormitory building at about the same time.

In 1978 the Charleston Laboratory of the Southeastern Division of the National Marine Fisheries Service was established at Fort Johnson. This involved a transfer of programs and personnel from College Park, Maryland, to Charleston.

The Charleston Higher Education Consortium Graduate Program in Marine Biology began with 6 to 8 students matriculated during the 1973-74 academic year. Although established as a consortial program, it was centered in the Department of Biology of the College of Charleston, with Dr. Norman A. Chamberlain as its first Program Director. In May, 1980, Dr. Paul A.

Sandifer assumed the position of Program Director in addition to his duties at SCMRD. Concurrently the Marine Biology Program became more truly consortial with more faculty involvement from the Citadel, the Medical University of South Carolina, and SCMRD. At that time the requirement that major advisors be College of Charleston faculty was eliminated.

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