

U.S. Naval Air Station,  
Wet Basin  
Pensacola  
Escambia County  
Florida

HABS No. FL-240

HABS  
FLA,  
17-PENSA,  
88-

PHOTOGRAPHS  
HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey  
National Architectural and Engineering Record  
National Park Service  
Department of the Interior  
Washington, D.C. 20243

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

HABS No. FL-240

U.S. NAVAL AIR STATION,  
WET BASIN

Location: U.S. Naval Air Station,  
Pensacola, Escambia  
County, Florida.

Present Owner: Commanding Officer.

Present Use: Boat slip.

Significance: The Wet Basin, constructed in 1852 of dressed granite blocks on wood and concrete foundations, is an example of an early building slip, a berth and a construction and repair shop for Navy's ships.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1852.
2. Architect: The Wet Basin was designed by the firm of John S. Gilbert and Zeno Secor. It was constructed under the supervision of Mr. Secor who arrived in Old Warrington in 1849 to oversee completion of the project.
3. Original plans and construction: See Historical Context, section B for construction information.
4. Original and subsequent owners: The Wet Basin (Bulkhead 177) was built on the old Pensacola Navy Yard, and it has been the property of the U.S. Navy during its entire history.
5. Alteration and additions: The first known addition to the Wet Basin was the construction in 1919 of a boat shed and work shop over the north end of the structure at a cost of \$46,150. This shed measured 214' x 54' 3" x 50' and contained 6,118 square feet of berthing and working area. Currently, it has a 20-ton movable Chesapeake crane (hoist) with which to raise and lower boats in need of repair. The Newport Contracting Company of Lee Hall, Virginia, did the work assisted by yard labor. The structure was designated as Building 295.

In 1938 a combination office and work shop, 29' x 26' and containing 737 square feet, was added to the west side of Building 295 at a cost of \$3,747. The work was accomplished by yard labor and the structure was identified as Building 295A.

Four years later, in 1942, a boat shed work shop, 19' 4" x 11' 10" with approximately 228 square feet, was constructed adjacent to Building 295A, on the southwest corner of Building 295. Designated as Building 295B it was erected by yard labor at a cost of \$750. Today, it is used for a paint and storage room.

All three structures, 295, 295A and 295B, are now considered one building which carries the original designation Building 295. In 1965 Tex Edwards Co., Inc. of Pensacola overhauled the building and replaced the siding, structural steel, and other repairs for \$84,929.64.

In 1966 safety cages were constructed on the existing metal ladders in the main boat shed at a cost of \$481.

Six new rubber fender skirts were installed on the south end of both sides of the basin in 1969. Each skirt is approximately 12' long. The work was accomplished by Conrad Weihnact Construction, Inc. of Jacksonville, Florida for \$11,400. It is not known when the original fender skirts were added, but it is certain that they were not put in at the time the basin was first built.

A 24" storm drain was constructed in the west wall of the basin in 1970. This drain, which helps in the rapid removal of water from the station, also contributes significantly to the silting of the basin.

B. Historical Context:

Four structures were inextricably connected in the construction and operation of the wet basin. They were a balance floating dry dock, permanent (granite) wharf (Bulkhead 178), railway and the closely related in regard to the docking, repair and construction of Navy ships at the Navy Yard.

According to the available records the permanent wharf (Bulkhead 178) was conceived first. This structure, which lies to the east but is connected to the wet basin, was designed in 1842 by James Herron, Civil Engineer at the Navy Yard. The plan was approved by Congress on July 1, 1844 and the cornerstone for the permanent wharf was laid on May 1, 1850. As steps were being taken for the construction of the wharf, plans were also being made for the wet basin, floating dry dock and railway.

Although the exact date of the design of the wet basin and floating

dry dock by the firm of Gilbert and Secor is not known, the firm was granted a contract on October 25, 1848 for the construction of a balance floating dry dock, railway and wet basin. The floating dry dock, 350' long, was to be made of wood, and the basin, about 138' x 380', of stone, concrete and granite, with a boat-gate to close the basin. The contract price was \$921,937. This firm was also under contract to build a similar setup for the Navy at Kittery, Maine. Mr. Secor of the company arrived in Old Warrington in 1849 to supervise the project. Work was soon underway, but suffered delaye for various reasons.

For example, on June 1, 1849, the contractors were compelled to suspend work because they could not obtain workmen form the North who would remain at Pensacola during the summer monthe. The reason, of course, was the periodic yellow fever and other fever epidemics from which the gulf coast suffered in those years. It might be noted that Pensacola and the other communities in the area could not provide sufficient skilled workmen at the time. An epidemic in 1853 caused a prolonged work stoppage. In addition, Congress failed to appropriate sufficient funds for the projects thus causing further delay in the completion of the work. Nevertheless, the floating dry dock was launched on March 19, 1851, and the wet baein and railway were sufficiently completed by 1853 to enable tests to be run.

Later that year a test was made using the U.S.S. COLUMBIA, but it failed to satisfy the inspectors and the Navy refused to accept the dry dock. A second test, made with the merchant vessel, MONARCH OF THE SEAS, also failed to win acceptance. Finally, in 1856, a satiefactory test using the U.S. sloop-of-war SARATOGA was performed and the dry dock, basin and railway were accepted. The Annual Report of the Secretary of the Navy for that ysar stated: "The balance floating-dock basin and railway, at Pensacola, are now in better condition than heretofore. The dock has been thoroughly repaired and strengthened, and is now much stronger than before. The rapidity with which wooden structures decay in this climate renders constant watchfulness and frequent repairs necsssary for the pressrvation of this dock, and the annual expenses for that object must therefore be necessarily large." The Spanish had experienced exactly the same problem in Pensacola especially whsn they had constructed their fortifications from pine and found that within a few years, they had completely deteriorated. The wet basin, however, was not constructed merely for the repair of ships, but it was also designed as a "building slip."

The Navy fully intended for Pensacola to become a first class construction yard and prior to the Civil War two ships were launched there. The U.S.S. PENSACOLA, a first clase eteam sloop-of-war of 3,000 tons, was launched August 13, 1859, commiseioned December 5, 1859, and sailed for Norfolk, Virginia December 21. The U.S.S. SEMINOLE, a second class steam sloop-of-war of 801 tons, was launched

June 25, 1859. The first attempt to launch the SEMINOLE, on June 22, failed because the tallow-on-the-ways congealed. She was commissioned on April 25, 1860 and left for Norfolk on May 7, 1860. Unfortunately, the success of the Pensacola Navy Yard for the repair or construction of ships-of-war was short-lived.

Confederate forces occupied the Navy Yard in January 1861, and remained there until May 1862. Prior to their evacuation of the yard, the Confederates sank the floating dry dock. They left only one building intact, Building 16, the chapel. On August 8, 1864, the Navy Department contracted with Benjamin W. Tucker, of Brooklyn, New York, to raise and remove all the machinery, parts and appurtenances of the wreck of the floating dock. This project must not have been very successful because on February 6, 1869, the Chief of the Bureau of Construction and Repair and Chief of the Bureau of Yards and Docks reported that since the sinking of the dry dock there had been no means of repairing the bottoms of vessels in need of such repairs.

Periodic efforts were made to rebuild the yard at Pensacola, but it seems obvious that between the end of the Civil War in 1865 and the Spanish-American War of 1898, Pensacola was largely neglected. In fact, yellow fever epidemics in the mid-1870s and in 1882-83, played no small part in the decision to temporarily close the yard in 1883. In addition, there was little to turn the attention to the gulf region during that 30-odd year period of place. It is not known whether there was even a floating dry dock for the repair of ships at Pensacola during those years. However, following the Spanish-American War, the Navy purchased a floating dry dock at Havana from Spain which was towed to Pensacola. This dock was used in conjunction with the wet basin for several years. The almost total destruction of the Navy Yard during the hurricane of September 1906, required extensive repairs to the yard. In 1911, the yard closed and it did not reopen until January 1914.

During World War I the wet basin was used as a temporary berth for a floating dirigible hangar. One of the earliest floating airplane catapults was also docked there, according to photographs of the time. However, since the advent of Pensacola as a Naval Air Station, the wet basin has served primarily for the berthing and repairing of small craft and is so used today.

Prepared by: William S. Coker  
Historian  
Historic American Buildings Survey  
Summer 1972

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: The Wet Basin, constructed in 1852 as a "building slip", was originally provided with locks at the open end and could be drained. A survivor of the Navy Yard's ship building days, the quay walls are built of dressed granite blocks, on concrete and wood pile foundations, extending seven feet above and twenty-three feet below mean low water level. The quay walls were continued into a breakwater at the west and formed a permanent wharf to the east. The basin is paved in granite.
- 2 Condition of fabric: The permanent wharf and the basin are in excellent condition. The seawall, west of the wet basin, is badly damaged and broken apart.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: On a 1907 drawing in the NAS Public Works Center, the wet basin originally measured 640' long and 150' wide. It currently measures 560' long and 130' wide. The quay wall extends west 85' and then turns southwest into the bay 80' where it forms the seawall or breakwater. On the east quay wall extends 75' where it turns to the northeast and extends 420' to become the permanent wharf. At this point the wall turned 90° and ran another 140' and tied into the shore. Presently, only a portion of the permanent wharf is visible as much of it is inaccessible under a wharf built for the Navy Training Carrier, USS Lexington.
2. Foundations: On an 1882 drawing in the NAS Public Works Center, foundations are shown to be concrete on wood pilings.
3. Walls: The walls are constructed of dressed granite blocks.

Walkways around the edges of the basin and the wharf are also of dressed granite blocks and are 59" wide and approximately 18" thick.

A boat gate notch approximately 440' from the north end of the wet basin marks the point between the shallow basin and the deep basin. The boat gate engaged the notch and enabled the floating dry dock to be maneuvered into the shallow basin. A railroad track perpendicular to the north end of the shallow basin was for the purpose of towing the floating dry dock into position.

It is assumed that the bottom of the shallow basin is paved with granite blocks. The Navy diving team went down and confirmed this to be true.

4. Stairways: Four stairways exist along the quay walls, two within the wet basin, one on each side just south of the boat gate notch, and one on each seawall facing the bay.

C. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: The long axis of the structure is oriented north and south. To the east of the structure lies a parking area for the Navy Training Carrier, the USS Lexington and a large fuel storage tank. West of the Wet Basin is Building 38, Plant Maintenance Shop (HABS No. FL-241). On the south lies Pensacola Bay while the north edge of the basin aligns with South Avenue.
2. Outbuildings: On the north end of the basin is a small boat shed, of corrugated metal and structural steel, that extends across the entire width of the basin. A lift crane on a monorail exists within the structure.

Prepared by: John A. Sanderson  
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Historic American Buildings Survey  
Summer 1972

PART III SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. Original Architectural Drawings and other records:

Measured drawings, floor plans and index cards indicating architectural, mechanical, electrical and general work on the wet basin in Engineering Department, Public Works Center, NAS Pensacola, Florida. Records are basically World War I to present.

Measured drawings, floor plans, Navy Yard maps in Bureau of Yards and Docks Plan Files, Navy Department, on microfilm, copy in Old Military Records Branch, National Archives, Washington, D.C. Index (16 mm.) see last part of Reel 13 and first part of Reel 14. Drawings, etc. of Pensacola Navy Yard are numbered 800-1-1 to 800-45-407, Reels 641 through 648.5 (35 mm.). Records date from about 1929 to end of World War II.

A copy of drawing of Wet Basin is available in the HABS Field Records.

B. Early Views:

An engraving and a photograph of the wet basin are on file in the Pensacola Historical Museum (Old Christ Church), Pensacola, Florida. The engraving shows the design and operation of the wet basin, balance floating dry dock and railway which dates from about

1848. It is not an exact replica of the wet basin. The photograph is a view of the floating dry dock (probably the one purchased from Spain) in the wet basin taken about 1907.

In addition, there are five photographs of the wet basin in the photographic file of the Naval Aviation Museum, NAS Pensacola, Florida: (1) aerial view of wet basin taken about 1916 showing the extension of the west dock which no longer exists, negative #000519; (2) view of the north end of the wet basin taken in March 1917 before the boat shed had been built over that end, negative #010135; (3) aerial view showing the floating dirigible hangar and floating airplane catapult docked in the wet basin, taken May 4, 1918, negative #000677; (4) view looking south showing the wet basin with several boats docked in it including the floating airplane catapult, taken August 23, 1918, negative #003293; and (5) aerial view of wet basin taken July 15, 1919, negative #010065.

B. Bibliography:

1. Primary and unpublished sources:

U.S. Navy. Annual Reports of the Navy Department. Washington, 1844-

2. Secondary and published sources:

Building Property Records, Plant Account Office, Public Works Center, NAS, Pensacola, Florida.

Washington, D.C. National Archives. Records Group 71, Entry 69. Construction Ledgers, 1832-72.

Washington, D.C. National Archives. Records Group 71, Entry 42. Contracts and Bonds, 1842-96.

Notes of Occie Club on file in the Pensacola Historical Museum (Old Christ Church), Pensacola, Florida. These are references taken largely from contemporary newspapers to the wet basin, etc.

Pensacola Gazette. Newspaper articles. May 4, 1850; March 22, 1851; November 22, 1856.

Pensacola, Florida. Office of Naval Records and Library. Letter from Director to Commander, Naval Air Training Bases, Pensacola, Florida, January 14, 1949. This letter contains a brief resume of the building of the wet basin, the tests of the floating dry dock and the construction of the ships at the Pensacola Navy Yard.

PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

The project was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) under joint sponsorship of the National Park Service, The American Revolution Bicentennial Commission of Florida, and the Historic Pensacola Preservation Board. Measured and drawn during the summer of 1972 under the direction of John Poppeliers, chief of HABS, by: Rodd L. Wheaton (Architect, HABS), June Project Supervisor; John A. Sanderson (University of Florida), July-August Project Supervisor; Dr. William S. Coker (University of West Florida), Historian; John M. Szubski (Princeton University), Architect; and by Student Assistant Architects: J. Tucker Bishop (University of Texas, Austin); John C. Hecker (University of Illinois, Urbana) and Scott A. Kinzy (University of Nebraska) at the United States Naval Air Station, Pensacola, Florida. Susan McCown, a HABS staff historian in the Washington, D.C. office, edited the written descriptive and architectural data in the fall of 1980. Jack Boucher, a HABS staff photographer, took the documentary photographs in March of 1974.